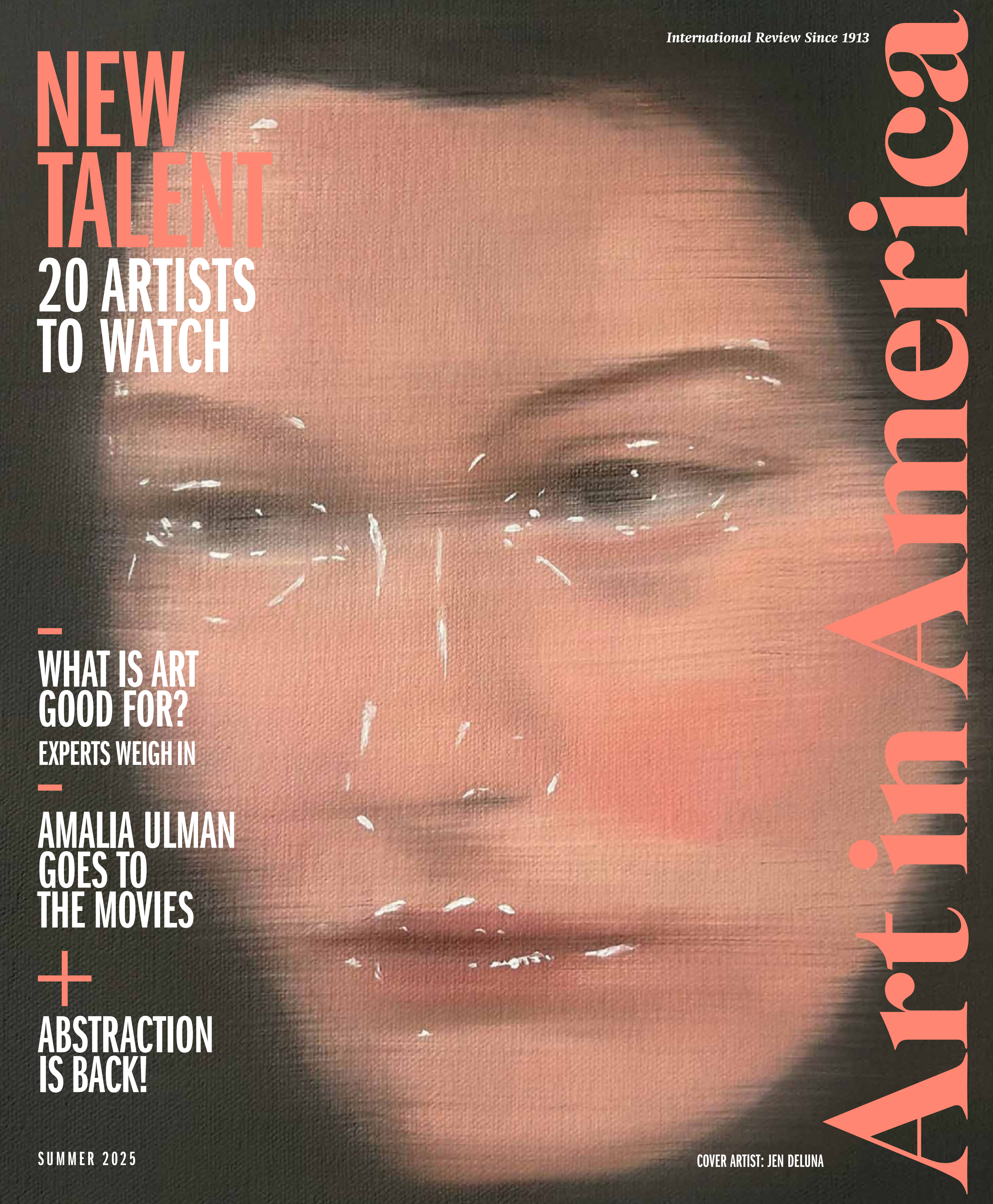

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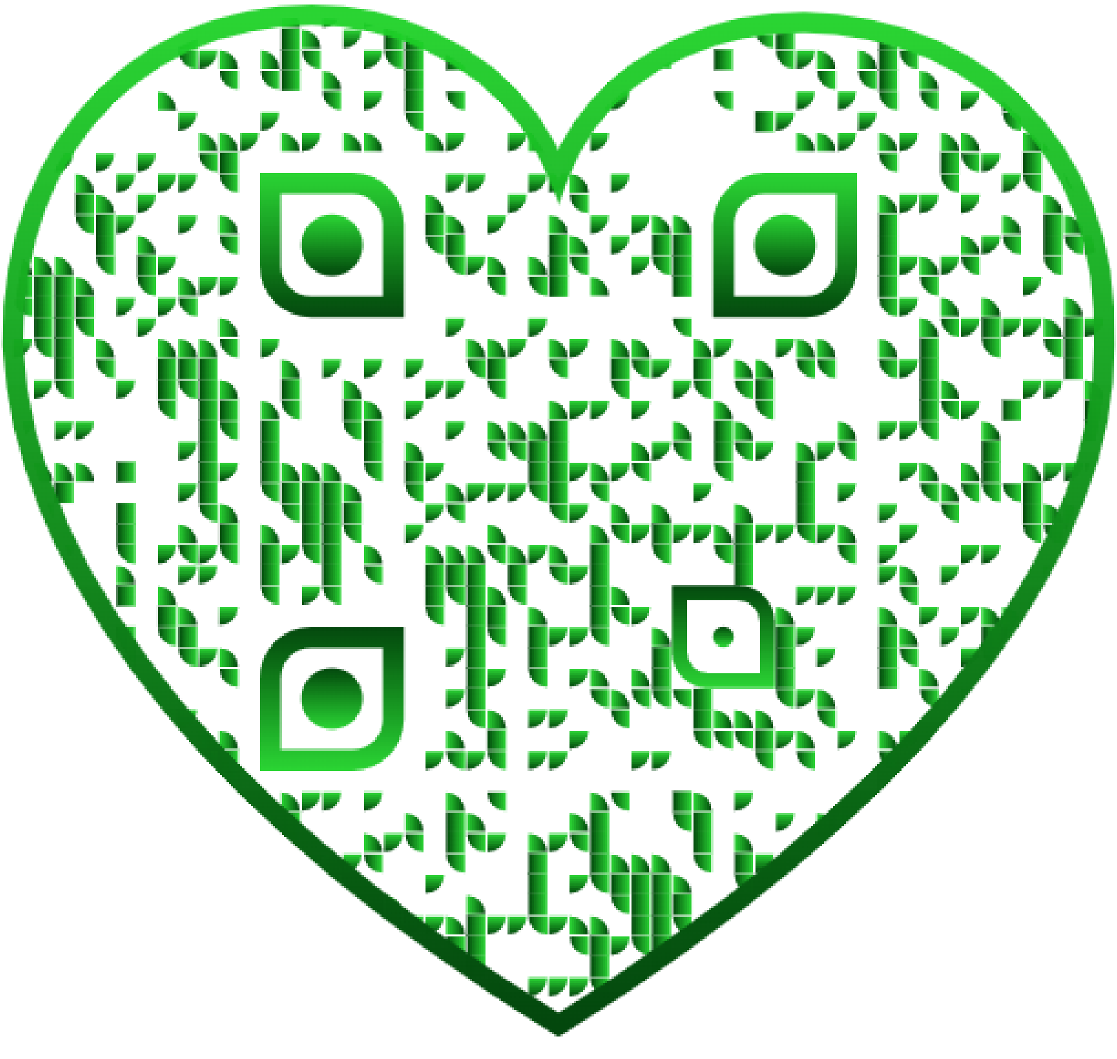

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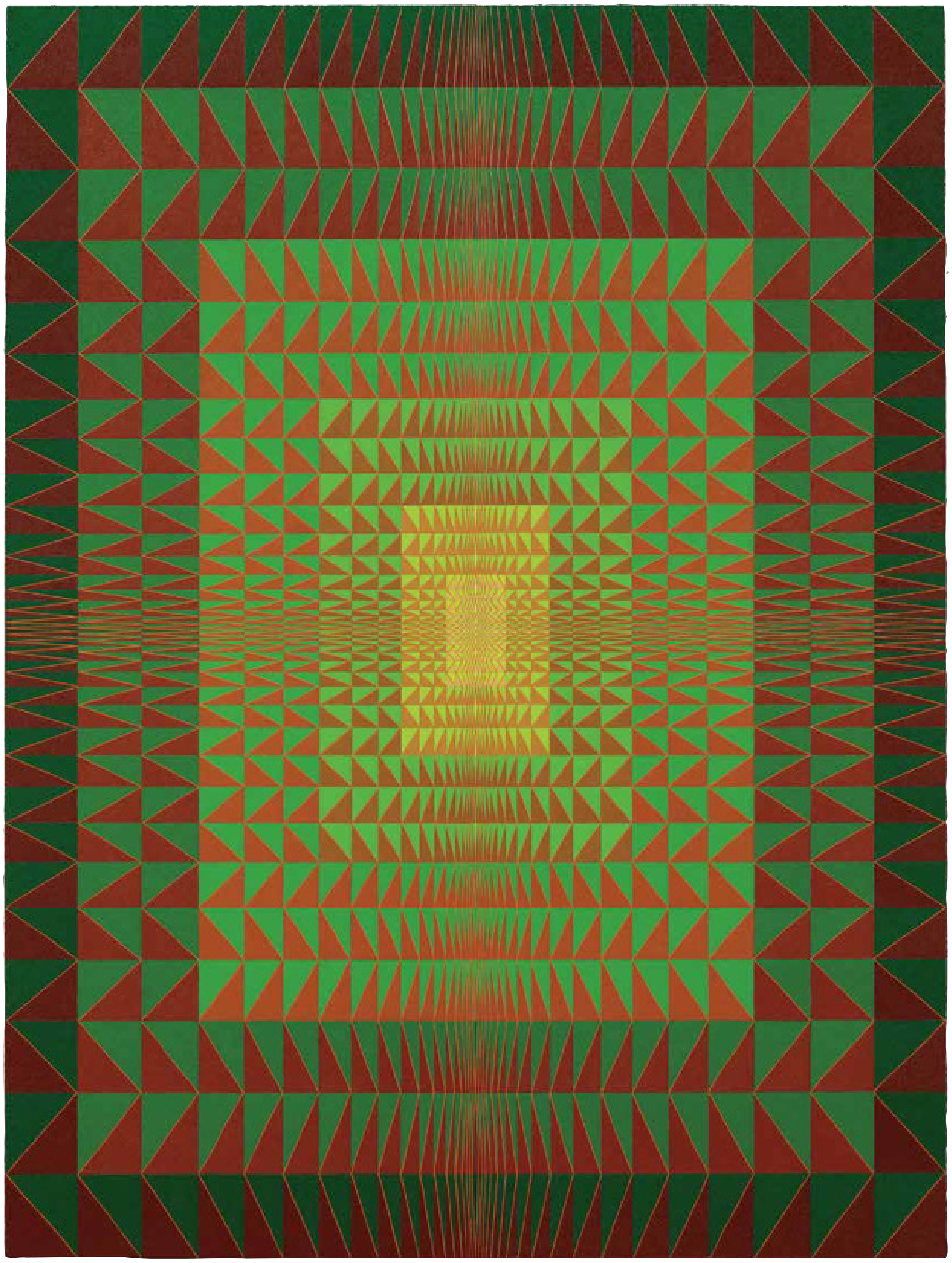

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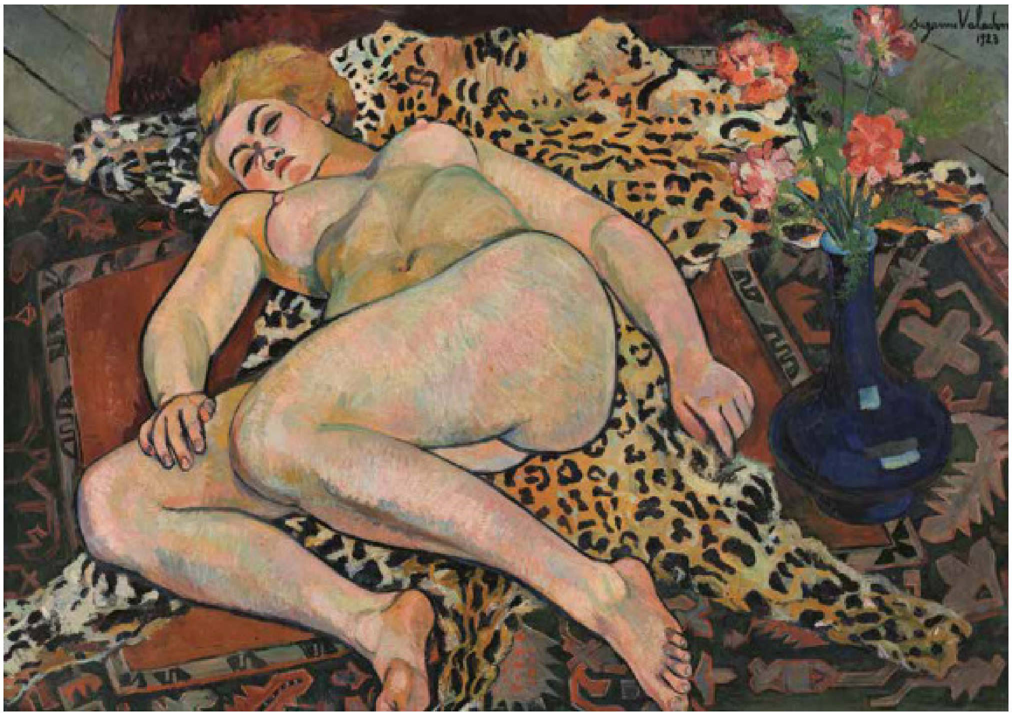

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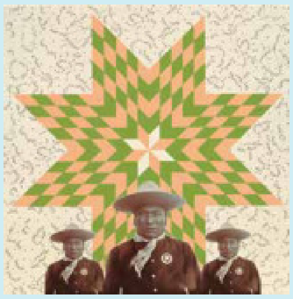

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From top: Lucien Arkas Collection; Courtesy Art Institute of Chicago; Private collection

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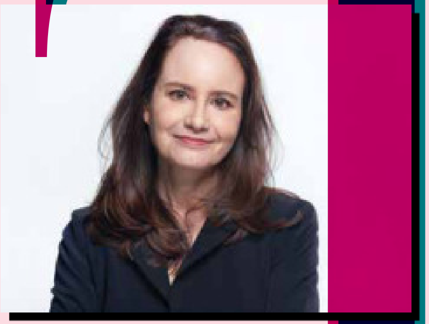


The outset of the second Trump administration—we were just 12 weeks in when this issue went to press—has been tumultuous and frightening, with DOGE having decimated one federal agency after another. As I write this, the handwringing in the political precincts of such websites as Bluesky has finally turned into something like action, with Democratic New Jersey Senator Cory Booker taking over the Senate floor for a 25-hour filibuster, besting the previous record (set in 1957 by conservative Strom Thurmond). He electrified the chamber—as well as everyone who tuned in online—with a rousing and eloquent anti-Trump diatribe.

The art world too has been wringing its hands. In early April, the inevitable happened: cuts at the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. So now we ask, what is to be done? Here, in *Art in America*'s annual New Talent issue, the answer—or rather, answers—come from artists.

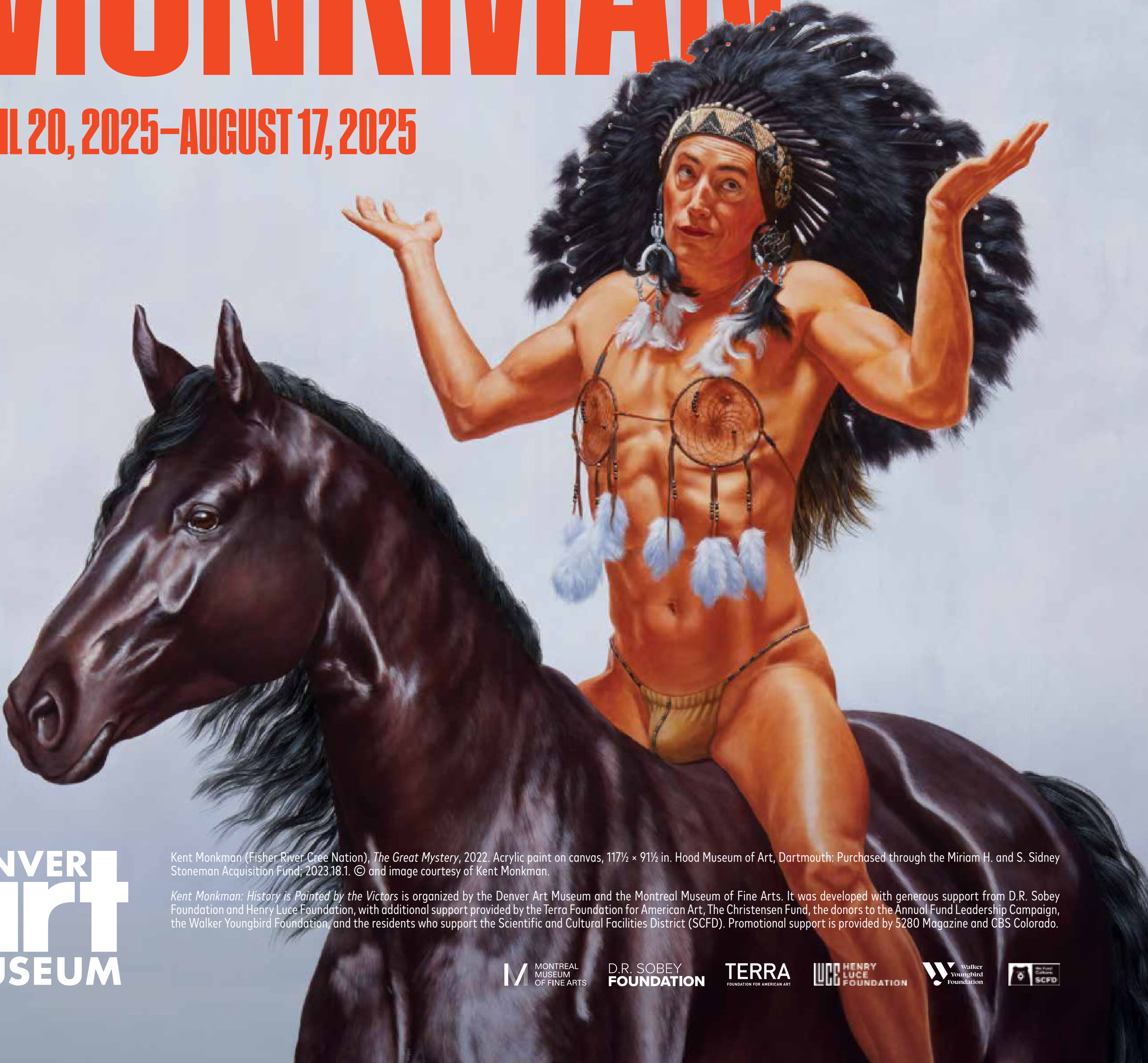
Nico Williams speaks of a powerful metaphor for how humor can be a political force: He elaborately beads everyday objects that are displayed in museums he couldn't afford to visit as a child, with the hope that they will be met with "booming Native laughter that shakes windows down the street." In this same vein, Bint Mbareh remarks, "I feel like it is a huge privilege to be able to make art that is political, but so much needs to be made fun of." Justin Allen, on the other hand, found political critique in 2000s-era indie sleaze music. "It was a weird moment when everyone was scared for different reasons," he says. "Whenever people are scared, interesting things happen in culture." He might as well be speaking about today.

Maybe the answer is just to continue to do things, even if—*especially* if—they become scary. Agnes Questionmark makes unflinching work about being trans, a state of being that is increasingly under attack by the current administration. McKenzie Wark writes in these pages about how Questionmark "spent 12 hours a day for 16 days in a glass enclosure at a subway station in Milan, suspended via slings and cables in a casing with a mermaid-like tail some 20 feet long. Something about monstrousness can be triggering: She tells me of viewers who yelled at her and banged on the glass." And yet, she persisted.

KENT MONKMAN

History is Painted by the Victors

APRIL 20, 2025–AUGUST 17, 2025



Kent Monkman (Fisher River Cree Nation), *The Great Mystery*, 2022. Acrylic paint on canvas, 117½ × 91½ in. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth: Purchased through the Miriam H. and S. Sidney Stoneman Acquisition Fund; 2023.18.1. © and image courtesy of Kent Monkman.

Kent Monkman: History is Painted by the Victors is organized by the Denver Art Museum and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. It was developed with generous support from D.R. Sobey Foundation and Henry Luce Foundation, with additional support provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art, The Christensen Fund, the donors to the Annual Fund Leadership Campaign, the Walker Youngbird Foundation, and the residents who support the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD). Promotional support is provided by 5280 Magazine and CBS Colorado.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Joseph L. Underwood

Joseph L. Underwood is a scholar and curator whose research focuses on artists from the African continent and such related themes as post-colonialism, (trans)nationalism, and biennialism. He is an associate professor of art history at Kent State University in Ohio. His curatorial projects include “The View from Here: Contemporary Perspectives from Senegal” and “TEXTURES: the history and art of Black hair.” Underwood has won several awards, including a Warhol Arts Writers grant, a Tyson Scholar fellowship from the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, and an Art Works grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. For this issue, he writes on the art and culture of Pan-Africa at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Fabiola Talavera

Fabiola Talavera is a curator, writer, archivist, and cultural producer based in Mexico City. She is chief curator at Laboratorio Arte Alameda and cocurator, with Leah Whitman-Salkin, of Montez Press Radio’s Mexico City broadcasts. Previously, at Casa del Lago UNAM, she founded the Poesía en Voz Alta Digital Archive and inaugurated the exhibition space Resquicio. Talavera writes regularly for *Obra*, *Purple*, and *Elephant* magazines. In these pages, Talavera profiles artist Alejandro García Contreras.

Lynne Cooke

Lynne Cooke is senior curator of modern and contemporary art at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. In 1991 she cocurated the Carnegie International, and has since helmed numerous major shows, including the 10th Biennale of Sydney (1996), “Rosemarie Trockel: Cosmos” (2012), and “Outliers and American Vanguard Art” (2018). Her publications include texts on Agnes Martin, Francis Alÿs, Zoe Leonard, James Castle, and Bridget Riley. Her latest exhibition, “Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction,” opened at LACMA in 2023 and is up through September 13 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. For this issue, Cooke offers a syllabus on self-taught artists.

Wilson Tarbox

In these pages, Wilson Tarbox profiles artist Libasse Ka. Tarbox is a Paris-based art critic and EUR ArTeC PhD candidate in Anglophone studies and art history at the University of Paris-Nanterre and the École du Louvre. He is a contributing writer for *Frieze*, and his writing has appeared in numerous publications, including the *Financial Times*, the *Art Newspaper*, *l’Humanité*, and *Artsy*.

Larissa Pham

For this issue, Larissa Pham reviews a book by German artist Hito Steyerl. Pham is the author of the 2016 novella *Fantasian* and the 2022 essay collection *Pop Song*, the latter of which was supported by the Yi Dae Up fellowship at the Jack Jones Literary Arts Retreat and was a finalist for the 2021 National Book Critics Circle John Leonard Prize. She is a frequent contributor to the *Nation* and *Aperture*, and her essays and criticism have appeared in the *Paris Review Daily*, the *New York Times Book Review*, and *Granta*. Pham teaches creative writing in the graduate program at the New School. Her debut novel is forthcoming in 2026.

McKenzie Wark

Australian-born writer and scholar McKenzie Wark is known for writing on media theory, critical theory, new media, and the Situationist International. She is best known for a book series of 21st-century critical theory, including *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004), *Gamer Theory* (2007), and *Capital Is Dead* (2019). Wark is a professor of media and cultural studies at the New School in New York. In these pages, she profiles artist Agnes Questionmark.

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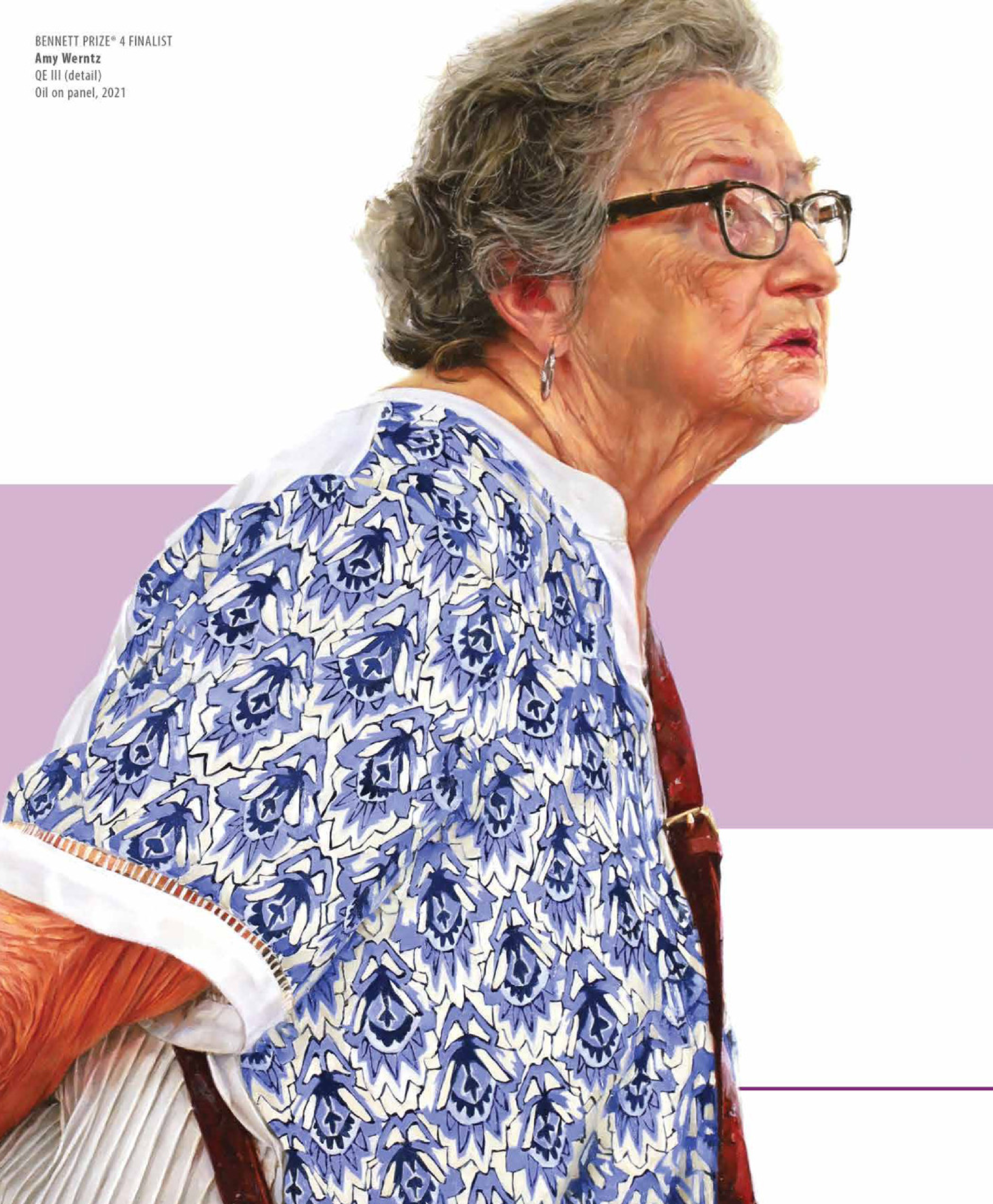

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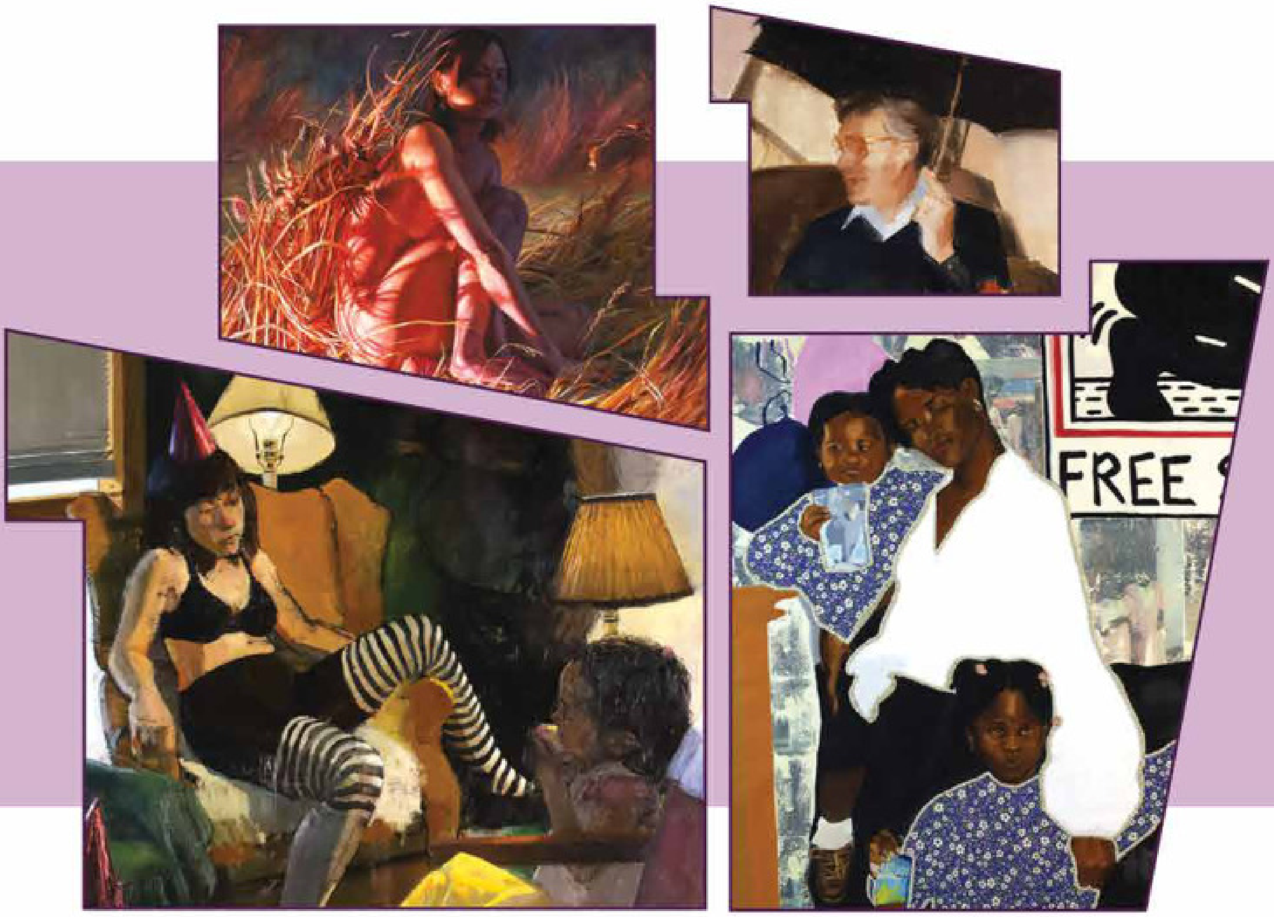

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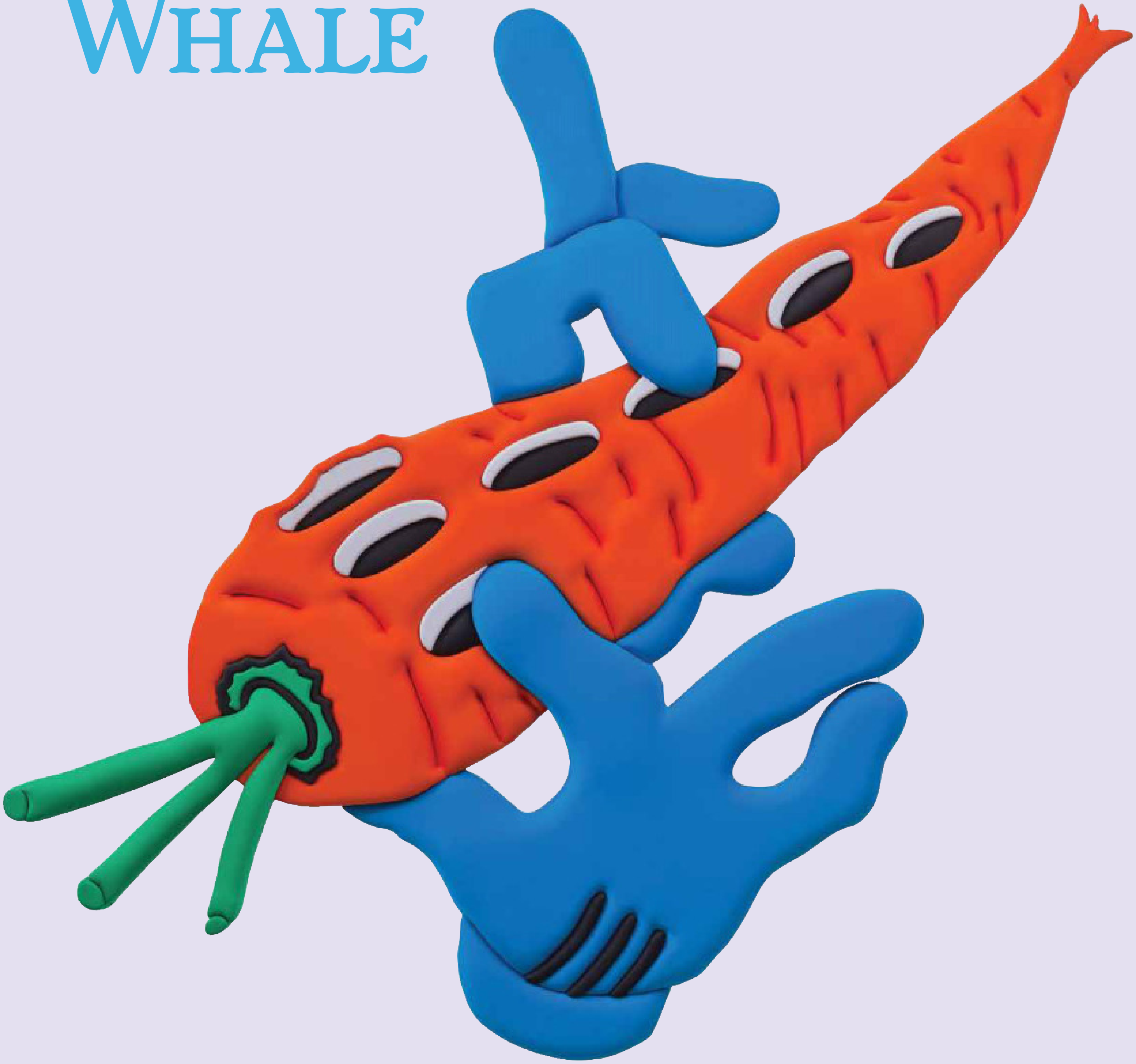

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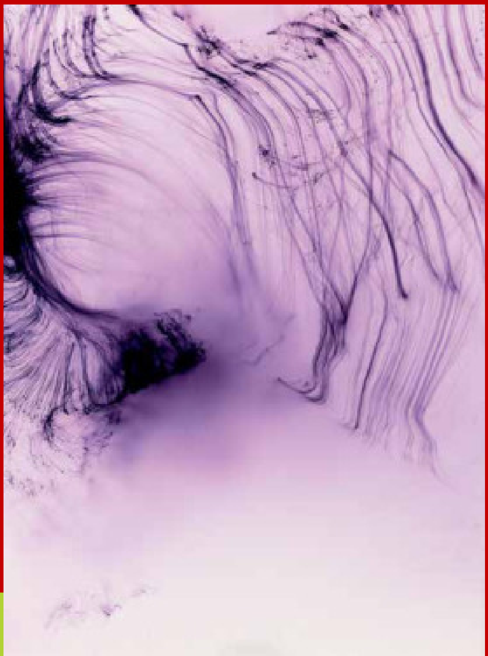
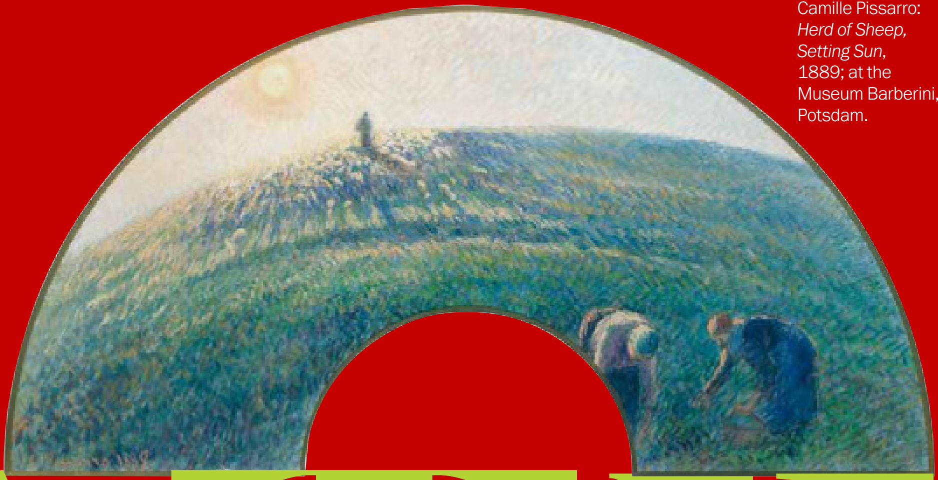
The Pied Piper, 2019. Neoprene, EPS foam, upholstery foam, staples, thread, polyester fiber, epoxy clay, MDF, plywood. 120 × 120 × 6.5 inches. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London. © Alex Da Corte. Image: Karma

Matthew Marks Gallery



Wolfgang Tillmans: *it's only love give it away*, 2005; at the Centre Pompidou, Paris.



Camille Pissarro: *Herd of Sheep, Setting Sun*, 1889; at the Museum Barberini, Potsdam.

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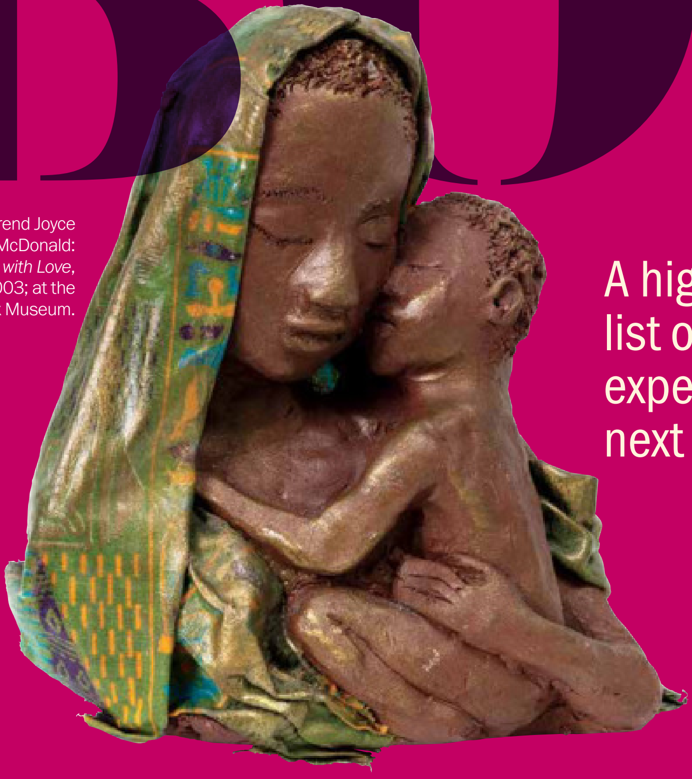
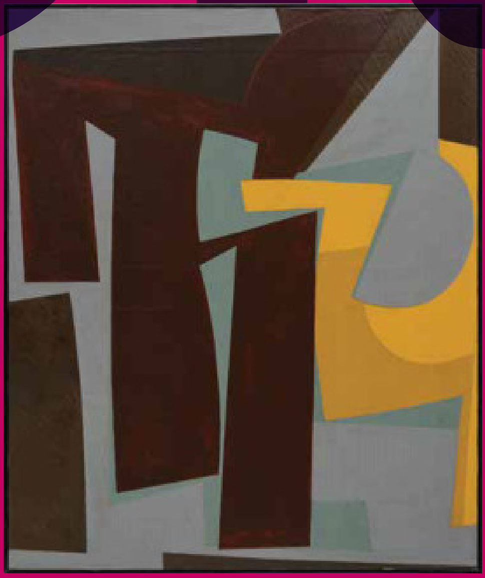


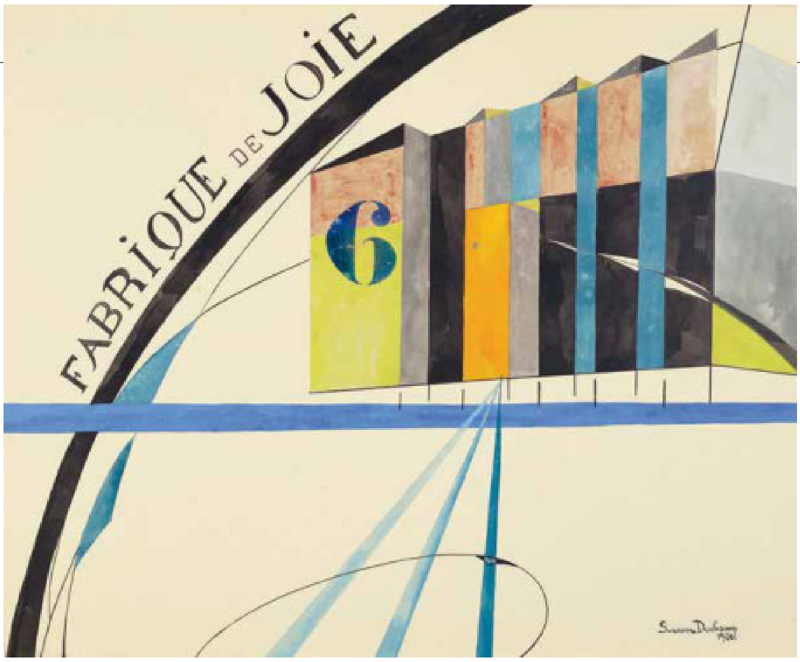
Reverend Joyce McDonald: *Covered with Love*, 2003; at the Bronx Museum.

A highly discerning list of things to experience over the next three months.



Mavis Pusey: *Dancer*, undated; at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.

Clockwise from top left: Courtesy Galerie Buchholz, Berlin, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, Maureen Paley, London, and David Zwirner, New York; Colección Perez Simón; Private collection; Photo Ruben Diaz/ Courtesy Gordon Robichaux, New York, and Maureen Paley, London



Suzanne Duchamp

Kunsthaus Zürich

As the sister of Marcel (as well as the lesser-known Raymond Duchamp-Villon and Jacques Villon), Suzanne Duchamp had a lot of distraction to contend with in terms of legacy management. But this 60-work show strives to reposition her as a notable painter and an important figure in the evolution of Dada, which she prodded and poked with painterly advances and material-minded experimentation as much as any decorated Dadaist should.

June 6–Sept. 7

Suzanne Duchamp: *Joy Factory*, 1920.

Wolfgang Tillmans

Centre Pompidou

Paris's biggest modern art museum is preparing to close for years while it undergoes renovations, but before it does, a final show: a vast exhibition for Wolfgang Tillmans that will be situated not in Centre Pompidou's galleries but in the library. The unusual setting will underscore how Tillmans's stylish photographs of people, places, and protests serve as an archive of their own, since they are filled with so much invaluable information about the state of the world today. The title of the show tells a story to that effect: "Rien ne nous y préparait - Tout nous y préparait" (Nothing could have prepared us - Everything could have prepared us).

June 12–Sept. 22

Wolfgang Tillmans: *Moon in Earthlight*, 2015.

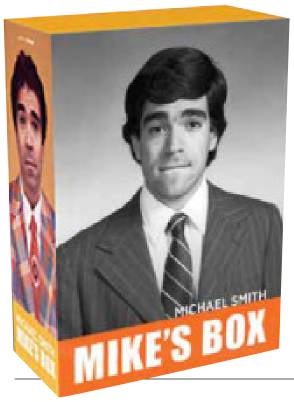
Ser Serpas
13.06.
–21.09.2025

Ser Serpas

Kunsthalle Basel

The young American artist Ser Serpas has risen quickly, with works formed from heavily used found objects and an installation that took pride of place in last year's Whitney Biennial. Though she's best known as a sculptor, this exhibition, which will open in the run-up to Art Basel, aims to highlight her work in a different medium: performance. Serpas will here collaborate with the Margo Korableva Performance Theater of Tbilisi in works utilizing the same kinds of scuffed, dirtied, and partly destroyed objects she enlists for her sculptures.

June 13–Sept. 21



Mike's Box

A storied denizen of the strange netherworld between performance art and comedy, Michael Smith has charted a singular path through and around the art world since the 1970s, when his work in different modes put him in league with idiosyncratic figures including Andy Kaufman, William Wegman, Cindy Sherman, Mike Kelley, and early cast members of *Saturday Night Live*. This 8-disc DVD collection from an imprint of the redoubtable underground record label Drag City gathers documentation of comedy shows, programs from cable-access TV, and works of musical theater from the early years to the present, with a book featuring an essay by writer and curator Tim Griffin and materials from Smith exhibitions at the New Museum, the Whitney, and Museo Jumex.

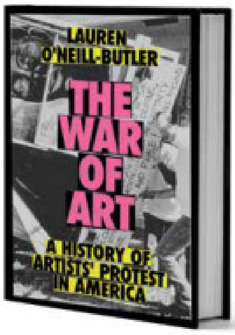
On sale May 30

Duchamp: Courtesy Galerie 1900–2000, Paris/©Suzanne Duchamp, 2024/ProLitteris, Zurich; Tillmans: Courtesy Galerie Buchholz, Berlin, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, Maureen Paley, London, and David Zwirner, New York; Serpas: Courtesy Kunsthalle Basel; *Mike's Box*: Courtesy Drag City

Berlin Biennale

The last Berlin Biennale, in 2022, was defined by its prioritization of participants from marginalized communities, among them members of the Dalit caste in South Asia and queer artists. The new Berlin Biennale goes further with a stated focus on “doing away with the notion of minority altogether.” More than other biennials of its caliber, the venturesome Berlin Biennale—this time curated by Zasha Colah—has always invested deeply in globalism. That worldview is likely to be enlisted here.

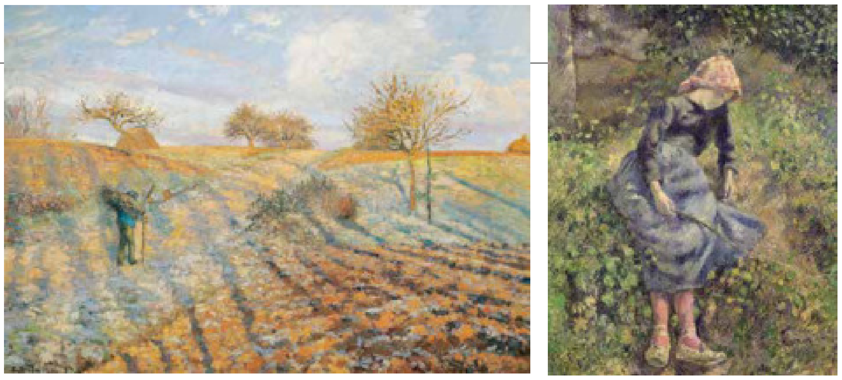
June 14–Sept. 14



The War of Art: A History of Artists’ Protest in America

This timely tome by Lauren O’Neill-Butler charts the history of artistic-activist debate going back to the 1960s, drawing on oral-history work related to the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, Women Artists in Revolution, ACT UP, and other organizations, as well as art by Agnes Denes, Edgar Heap of Birds, fierce pussy, and Nan Goldin, among others.

On sale June 17



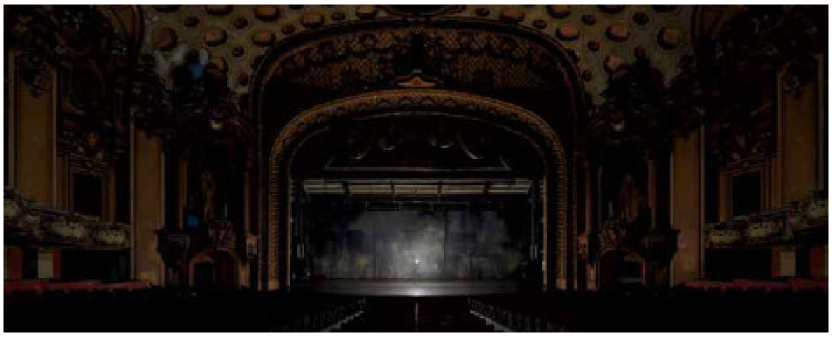
Camille Pissarro: *White Frost*, 1873 (left), and *The Shepherdess*, 1881 (right).

“The Honest Eye: The Impressionist Pissarro”

Museum Barberini

Although Camille Pissarro painted works that look traditionally Impressionist – many feature Parisian streets and brushy landscapes rendered en plein air – he was technically an outsider within the movement, as a Jewish Frenchman born in the Caribbean who identified as an anarchist. This retrospective in Potsdam, Germany, asserts that Pissarro’s unique standing led to a fresh kind of Impressionism that was more politically engaged than it might seem to contemporary eyes.

June 14–Sept. 28



Stan Douglas: *Ghostlight*, 2024.

“Stan Douglas: Ghostlight”

CCS Bard – Hessel Museum of Art

The conceptually dense and dazzling photo and video work of Stan Douglas has traveled forward and backward in time to engage ideas related to futuristic science-fiction, ’70s-era jazz-funk fusion, and all manner of factual and fictional flights of fancy. This 40-work survey in New York’s Upstate Hudson Valley will include the North American premiere of a multichannel video installation that revisits D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, a 1915 silent film that celebrates the Ku Klux Klan. Douglas will rethink the film, repositioning one notorious scene so that it no longer heroizes the white supremacists.

June 21–Nov. 30

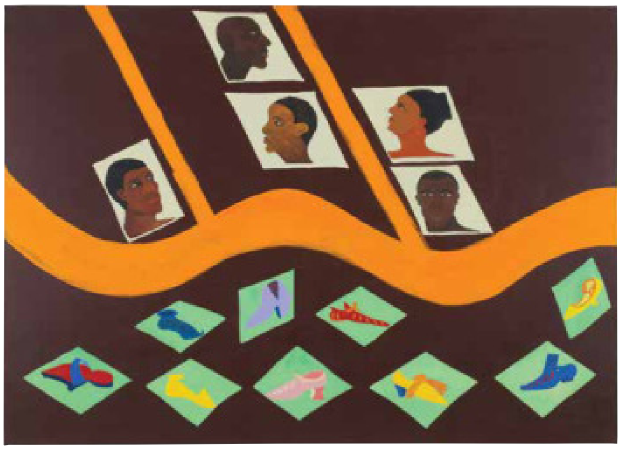
Art Basel
UBS

Art Basel

This year’s incarnation of the most momentous of all art fairs will feature 291 galleries, with 16 participating for the first time. The enterprise will also include a new sector, called Premiere, to showcase 10 galleries selling work made within the past five years. As fair director Maike Cruse told *ARTnews*, “Premiere will reflect the energy and innovation of the current moment – both in artistic practice and the world at large.”

June 19–22

The War of Art: Courtesy Verso, New York; *White Frost*: Courtesy Musée d’Orsay, Paris/akg-images/De Agostini Picture Lib./G. Dagli Orti; *The Shepherdess*: Courtesy Musée d’Orsay, Paris/bpk/RMN-GrandPalais/Hervé Lewandowski; Douglas: ©Stan Douglas/Courtesy Victoria Miro and David Zwirner; Art Basel: Courtesy Art Basel



Lubaina Himid: *Venetian Maps: Shoemakers*, 1997.

“Connecting Thin Black Lines 1985–2025”

Institute of Contemporary Arts, London

Lubaina Himid, who won the Turner Prize in 2017 at the age of 63, has risen to the status of a British national treasure, with plans to represent the country at the 2026 Venice Biennale. But while Himid’s art has come into view, her exhibition-making—an equally important part of her practice that has shone a light on Black British artists, especially when few others would—has gained less attention. That’s why for this show, the ICA is looking back on exhibitions she curated such as “The Thin Black Line,” which appeared at the same museum in 1985.

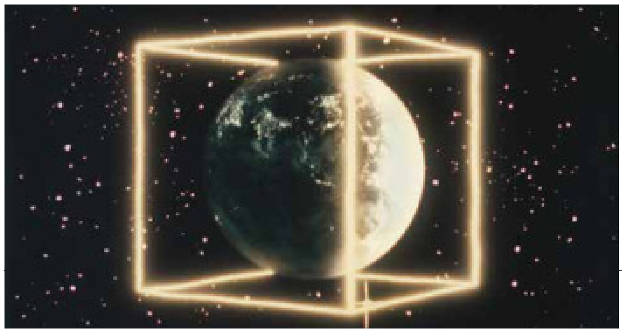
June 24–Sept. 7

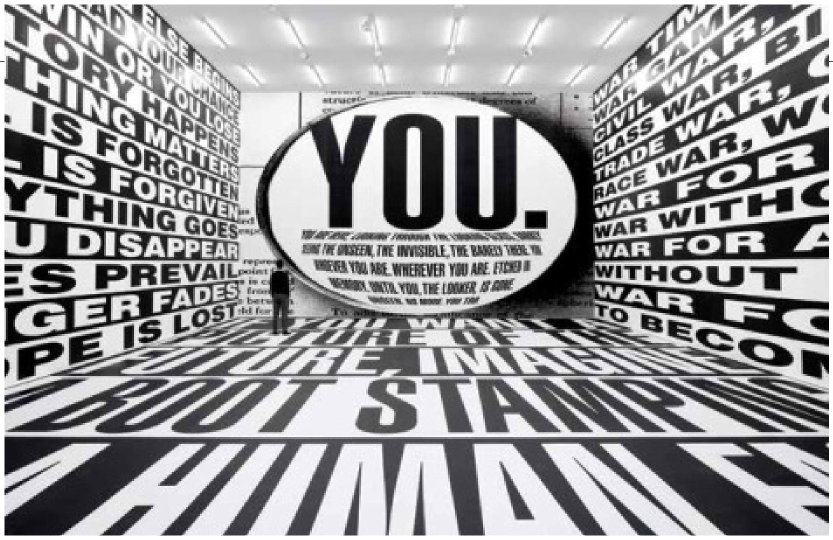
SITE Santa Fe International

The newly named SITE Santa Fe International is a relaunch of a prestigious biennial that began in 1995 but went on pause after its last edition, in 2018. For its resurrection, SITE handed the reins to star curator Cecilia Alemani, whose credits include a long stint at High Line Art in New York and a memorable turn at the helm of the 2022 Venice Biennale. Alemani’s guiding theme here is “Once Within a Time,” a reference to a movie by filmmaker Godfrey Reggio (of *Koyaanisqatsi* fame) and a signal of a storytelling impulse centered around characters in and around Santa Fe – among them, as a curatorial statement says, “historical figures, mythical beings, local heroes, unassuming residents, reclusive artists, forgotten writers, and charismatic healers.”

June 27–Jan. 12

Godfrey Reggio and Jon Kane: *Once Within a Time*, 2022.





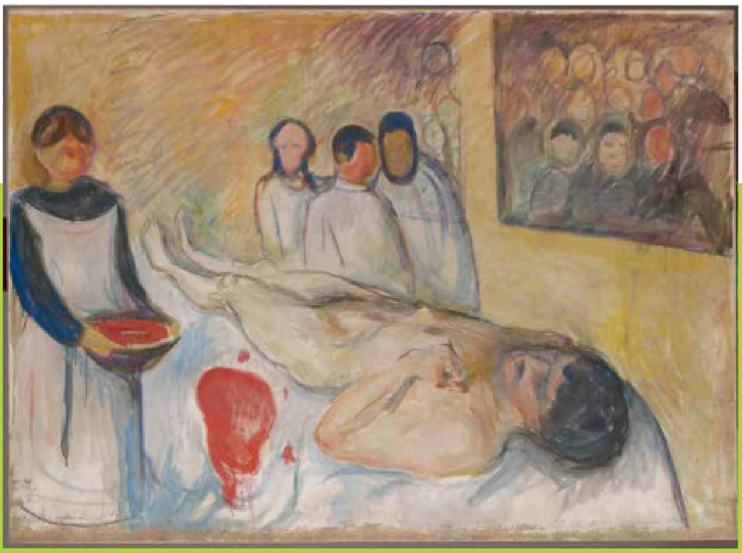
Barbara Kruger: *Untitled (FOREVER)*, 2017.

Barbara Kruger

Guggenheim Bilbao

Barbara Kruger’s last big retrospective, in 2021, was less a conventional survey than a show of past artworks that she remade and remixed, recasting prior one-liners written in her signature sans-serif font for videos, installations, and other formats. The gesture implied that Kruger’s thematic concerns – subverting the one-way flow of information in the media and charting invisible power dynamics – were still as new as they once were, back when she started making art in the ’70s. That would suggest that this Spanish survey, featuring rearranged old texts, will still be fresh, even if you caught the last show.

June 24–Nov. 9



Edvard Munch: *On the Operating Table*, 1902–03.

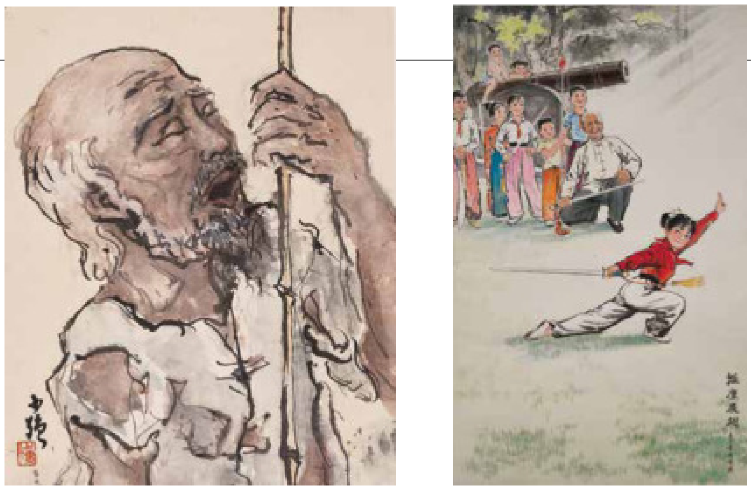
“Lifeblood: Edvard Munch”

Munch Museum

The intriguing premise for this show in Oslo is the changing nature of medical care during the lifetime of Edvard Munch, whose art (which he called his “lifeblood”) often engaged different signs of sickness and health in regard to himself and others around him. From the late 19th century, before hospitals were routine, to Munch’s death in 1944, ideas of care evolved considerably, and the change will be marked here by medical objects (among them a baby incubator, a vaccine certificate, and nursing badges) shown alongside works by Munch himself.

June 27–Sept. 21

Clockwise from top left: Courtesy Hollybush Gardens, London, and Greene Naftali, New York/©Lubaina Himid; Courtesy Sprüth Magers/Photo Timo Ohler; Courtesy Munch Museum, Oslo; Courtesy Oscilloscope Laboratories



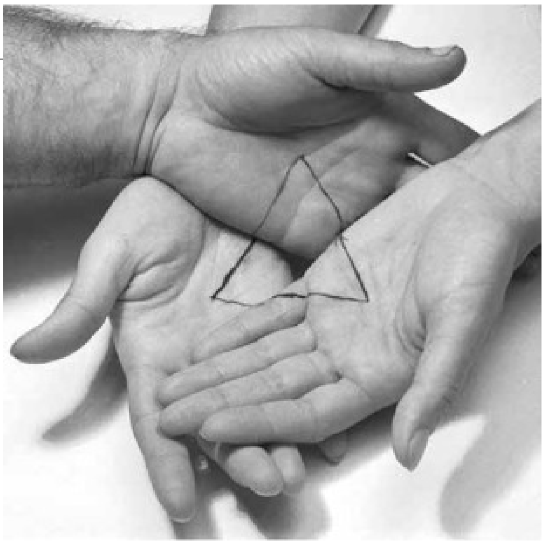
Left, Huang Shaoqiang: *Beggar* (detail), ca. 1930s, and right, Ou Yang: *Young Eagle Spreading Her Wings*, 1973.

“Canton Modern: Art and Visual Culture in Guangdong, 1900s–1970s”

M+

True to the ethos of a Hong Kong institution whose offerings typically consider art in the context of other kinds of cultural production, “Canton Modern” suggests that painting was but one tool in the project of defining the modern identity of Guangdong, a Chinese province that is home to cities including Guangzhou. Objects in this 200-work show put the province forward as one that underwent a big transition that could be seen through its artistic output, in which creators broke with traditional styles in favor of social realism and other newly engineered visual languages.

June 28–Oct. 5



Liliana Porter: *Untitled (Triangle)*, 1973.

“Liliana Porter: Un diálogo en perspectiva”

Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires

A little more than a decade ago, Liliana Porter exhibited, at this same museum in Argentina, an installation whose central figure stood less than two inches tall and presided over an array of little objects spread across multiple platforms. The work emblematized Porter’s fascination with the bizarre ways all things miniature can suddenly seem monumental, if considered from the right perspective – an interest that dates all the way back to the start of Porter’s career in the 1960s. Appropriately, this legend of the Argentine art scene is being given a grand-scale retrospective in the city where she was born.

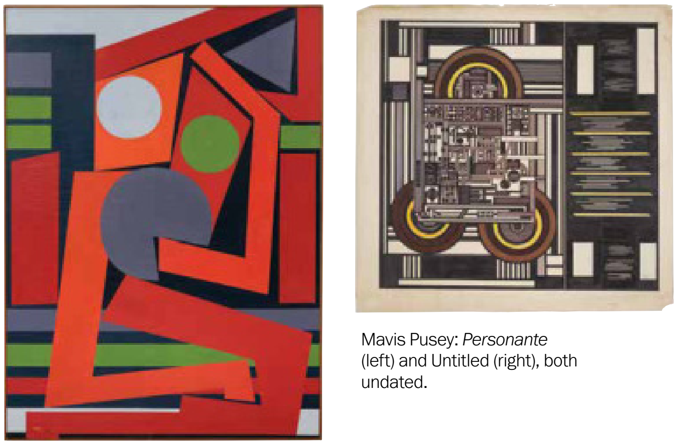
July 12–Oct. 13

“Mavis Pusey: Mobile Images”

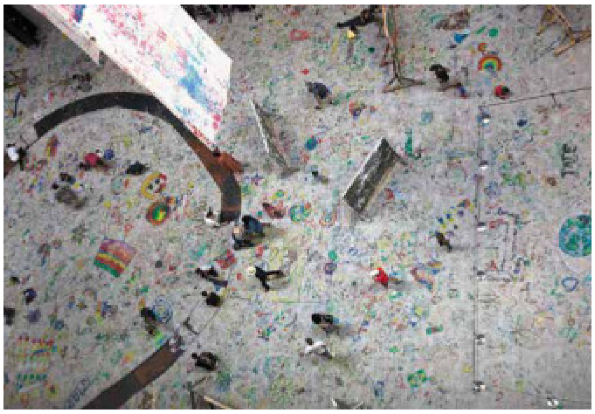
Institute of Contemporary Art Philadelphia

One year after her paintings appeared in the Whitney Biennial, Mavis Pusey is getting a full-dress retrospective with a focus on how she explored the concept of ruination. She’s best known for her “Broken Construction” series, paintings and prints made between the 1960s and ’90s in which she portrayed structures that suggest disassembled houses. But this exhibition goes beyond that series to show the many ways the late Jamaica-born artist used abstraction to convey the notion that the world is fundamentally unstable.

July 12–Dec. 7



Mavis Pusey: *Personante* (left) and Untitled (right), both undated.



“For Children: Art Stories since 1968”

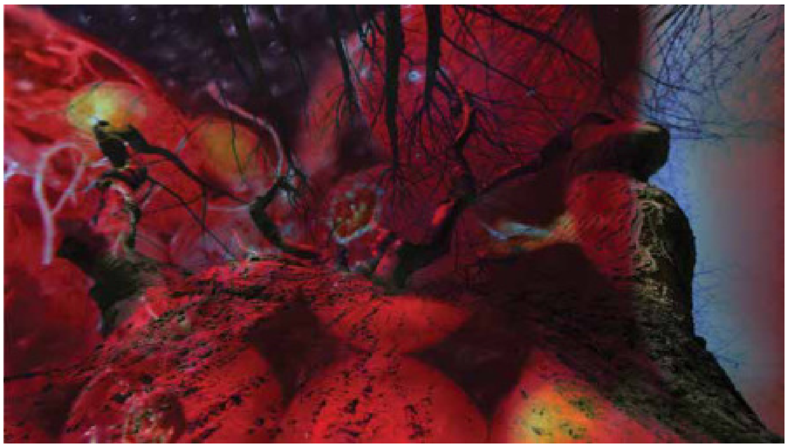
Haus der Kunst

Focused on kids but holding out the promise of intergenerational dialogue, this unusual show will tell the story of art that has involved children as collaborators. An eclectic artist list suggests a wide variety of takes on that description, with names including Nairy Baghramian, Yto Barrada, DIS, Olafur Eliasson, Meredith Monk, and Rachel Rose. And there will be two large installations that invite different kinds of participation: an invitation from Ei Arakawa-Nash for museumgoers to draw on the floor, and a sculpture for skateboarding by Koo Jeong A.

July 18–Feb. 1

Ei Arakawa-Nash: *Mega Please Draw Freely*, 2021.

Clockwise from top left: Courtesy Han Mo Xuan Collection (2); Courtesy MALBA, Buenos Aires; Private collection (2); Photo Brotherton-Lock



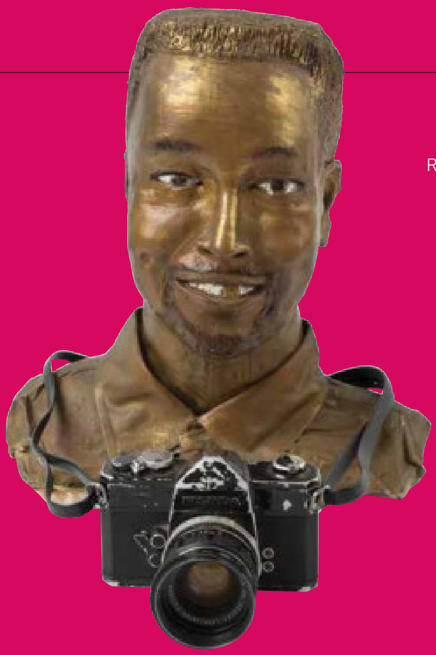
A still from a 2024 video by Pipilotti Rist.

Pipilotti Rist

UCCA Center for Contemporary Art

Certain large-scale video installations by Pipilotti Rist, including one at MoMA famously involving menstrual blood, have proven divisive, with detractors claiming they are nothing more than eye candy. But her defenders argue that visual pleasure is the point in work that shows how bodies are beautiful and innards are irresistible. Rist will take up her corporeal fascinations in this show in Beijing, with centerpiece status granted to a new video installation commissioned for the occasion.

July 19–Oct. 19



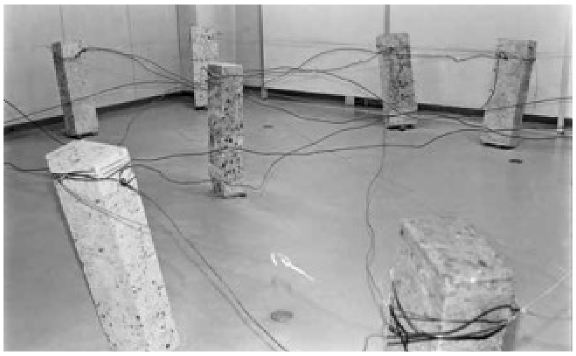
Reverend Joyce McDonald: *My Dad, My Hero (Willie McDonald)*, 1998.

“Ministry: Reverend Joyce McDonald”

Bronx Museum

As a sculptor and ceramicist since the 1990s, Joyce McDonald has conjoined her work as an ordained minister with her practice as an artist in search of a higher purpose. After a tumultuous upbringing—including bouts with addiction and HIV that she has made part of her story—McDonald turned to an art therapy program and soon after, starting working with Visual AIDS. Since then, she has produced a growing body of work with clay and everyday materials that evince a certain sort of figurative power. Expect her first museum show to be a stirring experience.

July 25–Oct. 19



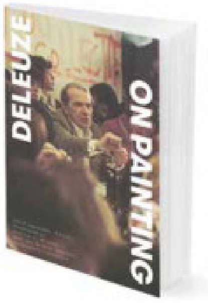
Kishio Suga: *Placement of Condition* (detail), 1973.

Kishio Suga

Dia Beacon

Works in concrete, wax, metal, and stone by Japanese sculptor Kishio Suga stand to look at home in Dia Beacon, the extravagantly sized postindustrial haven in Upstate New York that serves as an outpost for Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, and other artists who riff on the pros and cons of monumentality. The Japanese artist was associated with the 1960s-era movement known as Mono-ha (School of Things), and this show will feature works made from then through the mid-’90s. It will also include the first screening of Suga’s “mystery film,” *Being and Murder* (1999), outside Japan.

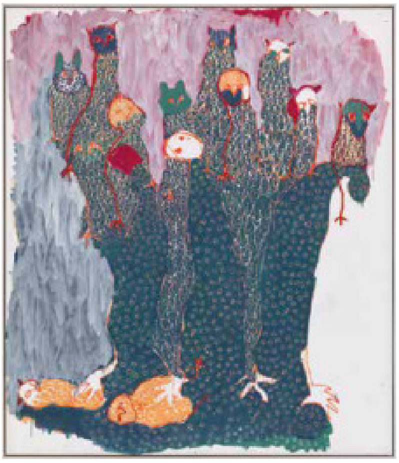
July 25–ongoing



On Painting: Courses, March–June 1981

Gilles Deleuze had a lot to say about the order and disorder of the world, much of it intensely incisive and all of it brain-bendingly complex in ways that make theory fiends’ eyes go wide while those of others roll back in their head. This book compiles transcriptions of eight seminars Deleuze gave on “painting and its intersections with philosophy,” with annotation by philosopher David Lapoujade and musings on figures including Rembrandt, Delacroix, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Jackson Pollock, and Francis Bacon.

On sale Aug. 12



Portia Zvavahera

Institute of Contemporary Art / Boston

Long viewed as anathema to avant-garde art-making, religious imagery has officially returned to the field of painting, and one of the leading practitioners in this regard is Portia Zvavahera. In paintings of her dreams, she has vividly represented unearthly beings in grand enrapturing pictures that transcend the waking world, with many references to her Pentecostal upbringing. Zvavahera has called her dreams a way of “direct communication with God”; this show, centered around recent paintings of hallucinatory animals, aspires to move its viewers toward similar spiritual states.

Aug. 28–Jan. 19

Portia Zvavahera: *Ndirikukuona* (*I can see you*), 2021.

Rist: Courtesy Pipilotti Rist; McDonald: Photo Greg Carideo/Courtesy Gordon Robichaux, New York, and Maureen Paley, London; *On Painting*: Courtesy University of Minnesota Press; ©Portia Zvavahera/Courtesy Stevenson and David Zwirner; ©Kishio Suga/Courtesy BLUM, Los Angeles, Tokyo, and New York

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

BOOM

ART & DESIGN IN THE 1940S

ON VIEW THROUGH SEPT 1

COMING SOON

BRAND X EDITIONS: INNOVATION IN SCREENPRINTING
OPENS JULY 5

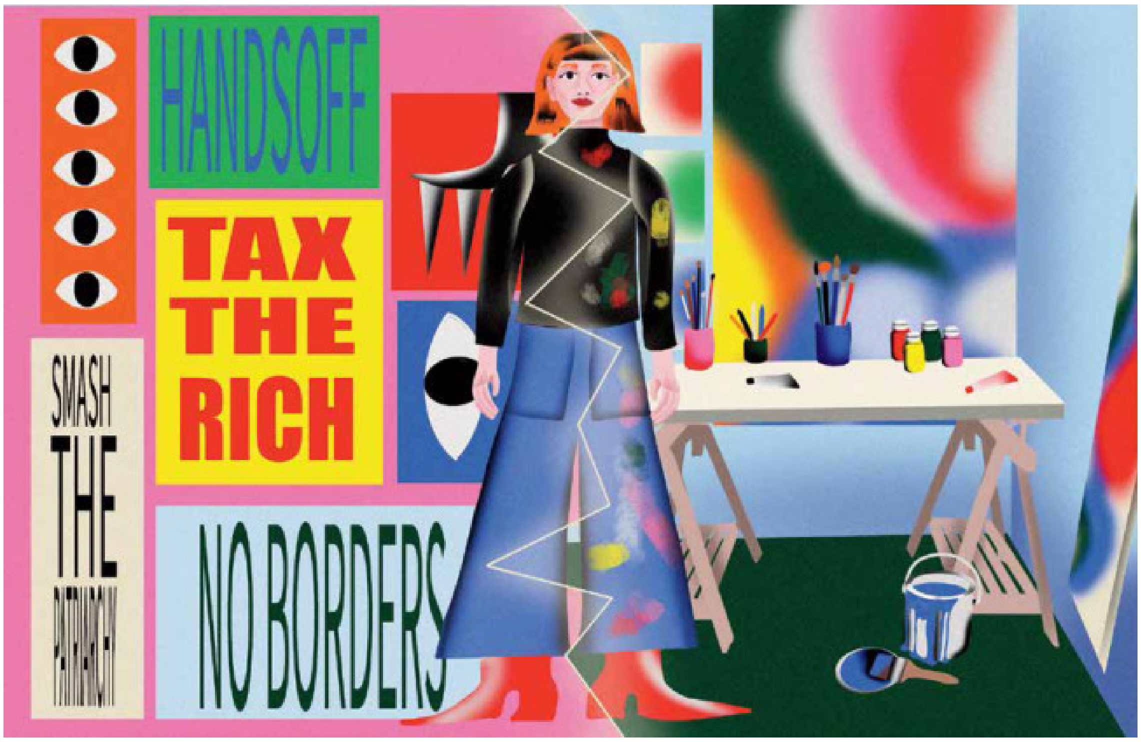
DREAMWORLD: SURREALISM AT 100
OPENS NOV 8

Dinner Dress (detail), summer 1946, designed by Elsa Schiaparelli (Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of Mme Elsa Schiaparelli, 1969-232-28); *Untitled Large Mosaic* (detail), 2024, by Rashid Johnson (Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of Brand X Editions, New York, 2025); *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (Family Tree)* (detail), 1936, by Frida Kahlo (Museum of Modern Art, New York)

Hard Truths

A painter wonders whether she doth protest too much, and a gallery worker cringes over a regrettable one-night stand.

by Chen & Lampert



During Trump's first term, I took a turn toward activism in my art, making protest pieces that felt urgent and necessary. During Biden's time, I eased back into abstraction, and it was like coming home. Now that Trump is back, I can't handle the mental strain of boomeranging back to politics. My art ceased to be a leaping-off point for personal exploration and instead became a confirmation of the chaos of the world. I'm struggling to reconcile my responsibility as an artist with my focus on mental peace. Do you have any advice?

Your conflict exemplifies every painter's continual existential crisis: to rage or not to rage? During the first Trump term, you wielded your brush to create blazingly urgent protest art. Under Biden, you pounded "snooze" on the alarm and found peace in shapes and color. The hellscape of 2025 is dragging you back into the dark hole again, but here's the thing: You don't have to be Paul Chan. And honestly, that's for the best. His sloganeering work made no viable political impact in its day and hasn't exactly aged like fine wine. It's more like a garish fruit punch that leaves your taste buds wondering, "Was this ever actually good – or was I just really thirsty?"

You don't need to sacrifice sanity by trying to be important. Sometimes, painting vibes is enough. If you're feeling guilty about not painting your dissent, sneak it in quietly. Let your brushstrokes drip with defiance, like a hard-to-decipher protest sign that got lost on the subway going to the march. Abstraction is versatile like that – leave the interpretation up to the viewer. Maybe those harmonious blobs *are* a statement on late-stage capitalism if you tilt your head just right. Who's gonna say they aren't? In an absurd world that is determined to grind us into Soylent Green, serene rectangles are basically a raised middle finger.

If your activist itch still won't let you sleep at night, set up a rage corner in your studio. Splatter paint, scream into the void, make a creative mess. It may not yield much great art, but it will at least feel good. Think of your work as a protest against stress. Ultimately, joy is an act of resistance too. Making art that keeps you whole may be the most radical act of all (other than going Luigi).

I work at a gallery where, until recently, my biggest problems were tracking down invoices and babysitting stoner artists. That was before my one-night stand with the gallerist after an art fair party in London. What we had felt like more than just a hook-up. We held each other and talked about our childhoods while bonding over our hatred of the same collectors. Since that trip we've both pretended it never happened, and it's killing me. The situation is confusing and disrespectful, not to mention humiliating. I'm considering quitting but wonder if I should sue him for sexual harassment. He's my boss, after all.

This is in the top-five list of art-cringe questions we've been asked most over the years. Though you may have a case to call out a workplace violation, think twice before immediately suing this cuddle buddy if you cannot cough up for a good lawyer. Make sure you have all your damning evidence in hand and a great PR team to broadcast your side of the fight. Unfortunately, your boss likely has a slush-fund/hush-fund set aside to deal with problems like you that come up on work trips. This is money he keeps at the ready to hire cutthroat counsel, an evidence-planting detective, or, if need be, an equalizer equipped with a silencer. While you line up your ducks, the best way to shake him down is with your cache of sexts and ruinous anatomical pics. With this sword of Damocles hanging over his head, milk the situation – metaphorically, not literally – for networking opportunities, contacts, and insider gossip. Consider it severance for emotional damage until the final chop. ●

***Howie Chen** is a curator who has also worked as a derivatives analyst.*

***Andrew Lampert** is an artist, archivist, film restorationist, author, and curator.*

Your queries for Chen & Lampert can be submitted to hardtruths@artinamericamag.com

Quiz

Should You Take Up Running Now that Gallerists Are Doing It?

These days every art dealer from Tribeca to Basel is clocking sub-7-minute miles, posting Strava maps that resemble Agnes Martin grids, and declaring running to be their “new meditation.” Is this an actual health regime or just another art world performance piece? Take this quiz to help decide if you should lace up or sidestep this latest trend.

1. What’s your main reason for considering running?

a) Alignment of body and mind toward a higher consciousness and positive lifestyle
b) The need to get faster at ghosting people at openings
c) Preparatory groin injuries to work up to getting blue-balled by artists and collectors

2. How do you feel about early mornings?

a) Best time of the day to still be asleep
b) With cocaine, it’s actually just a sunny part of last night
c) A safe time to emerge from the crypt

3. Your preferred running shoes are ...

a) Hoka
b) Brooks
c) Ferragamo wing-tips

4. What’s your running playlist like?

a) Charli XCX
b) Artnet podcasts
c) Yoko Ono screaming bloody murder

5. What’s your biggest concern about running?

a) Shin splints
b) Short shorts
c) Running out of cocktail conversation about yourself

6. Where do you envision yourself after six months of running?

a) Entering a half-marathon with my gallerist buddies
b) Selling my running gear on Poshmark for ketamine funds
c) Having a stroke in the middle of the West Side Highway running path

7. How do you hydrate post-run?

a) Guzzle Gatorade
b) Sip a gin martini
c) Chug the blood and/or urine of a shredded young art handler

8. What’s your take on the “runner’s high”?

a) Equal to the euphoric feeling of selling art
b) Provides a sense of achievement and agency that is rare in daily life
c) Less potent than an eight ball with a Celsius chaser

9. What picture will you post on social media after a run?

a) A Rocky Balboa victory pose at the top of the Whitney Museum steps
b) A close-up of my sweat droplets with the caption “mixed media”
c) A PDF of available works for Basel

10. How will you celebrate completing your first 10K?

a) Quit the art world to become a full-time ultramarathoner
b) A six-month hospital stay to recover from the debilitating pain of being a lifelong non-jock
c) Issue a statement about your accomplishment through the gallery PR consultants

Question	Points for each choice		
1	A) 2	B) 3	C) 3
2	A) 1	B) 3	C) 2
3	A) 2	B) 1	C) 3
4	A) 1	B) 3	C) 2
5	A) 2	B) 1	C) 3
6	A) 3	B) 1	C) 2
7	A) 1	B) 2	C) 3
8	A) 2	B) 3	C) 3
9	A) 2	B) 1	C) 3
10	A) 2	B) 1	C) 3

Key

If you scored:

10–16:
Make your assistant run using your app and claim their numbers as your daily activity. Blame your weight gain on having to dine frequently with Italian collectors who are killing your workout.

17–23:
End every run at Burger King, where you devour a Texas Double Whopper on Instagram Live. Defiantly show the art world that you are willing to follow every trend—but that you’ll have to do it your way.

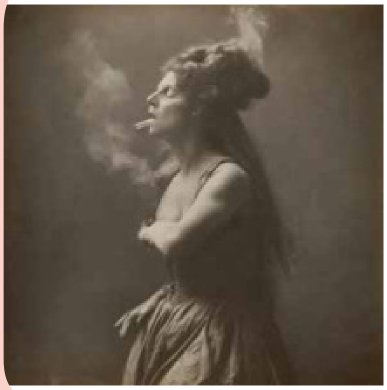
24–30:
Approach running with the same tenacity that you do gallery business. Stock up on HGH, performance enhancers, young-blood plasma, and genetic boosters so that you can dominate the field.

Illustrations by Pamela Guest

Michèle Lamy

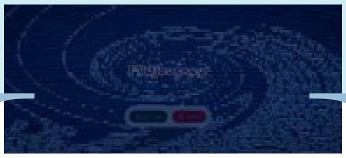
The designer and executive manager of art and furniture at Owenscorp, the company she cofounded with fashion designer Rick Owens, discusses AI and hopes for the future.

1



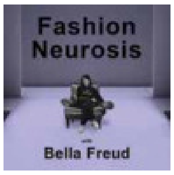
American film director **Bennett Miller's recent exhibition of AI photographs at Gagosian Paris** had me mesmerized. The works appear unassuming at first glance, like one of a woman smoking two cigarettes at the same time. But on closer inspection one can see smoke coming out of her hair, and bodily deformities, like her hands. AI can have a hard time reading certain details. All of Miller's photos are close to reality but have something missing or twisted that makes viewers question which world we are in.

2



When I started working on the program **Midjourney**, it completely immersed me in this AI world. I like that I can give the system very specific word-prompts, run around, smoke a cigarette, and then it produces an image from seemingly out of nowhere. I'm fascinated by the effect of this surprise, as if the machine has read my mind. AI is some kind of utopia—an opportunity to create something that is in the making because it's all new.

3

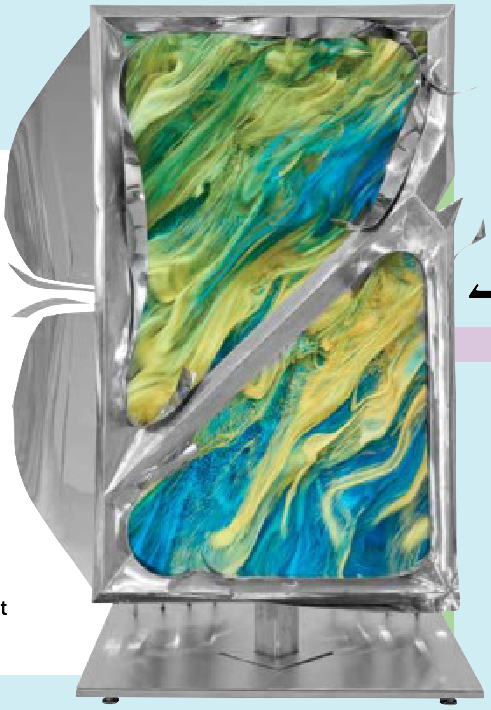


Fashion designer Bella Freud is the daughter of artist Lucian Freud and the great-granddaughter of psychoanalysis inventor Sigmund Freud. In her podcast ***Fashion Neurosis***, Bella invites celebrity guests to discuss the connection between fashion and identity. Inviting them to lie down on the couch, tapping into the Freudian, Bella starts by asking people what they are wearing and ends by reminding us of our relationships to one another. Australian musician and actor Nick Cave, for example, was on the podcast with his wife, Susie. They really opened their hearts and showed the tenderness of their relationship in a way that made me proud to be human.

4

I met American rapper Travis Scott behind the scenes of *Saturday Night Live*. When I heard his latest album, ***Utopia*** [2023], it felt like a revolution. He is part of this new generation of music, and the kind of music he's bringing to the world is not only timely—it's bringing a lot of hope to an otherwise bleak world. I'm from a generation who thought we already had all our fights. The idea of a utopia that we want to be real, and energy in younger thinkers are so important for continuing forward.

5



There is a feeling now that we have this tool that we can [use to] create any art we want, but I take issue with **Christie's auction house selling AI works** before we can imagine another world. This tool is supposed to change our system, but they are trying to keep it embedded in the capitalist system for their own benefit. Christie's, please wait a little bit.

—as told to Francesca Aton

Lamy: Photo Arnold Jerocki via Getty for TOM FORD; 1: Courtesy Gagosian; 2: Courtesy Midjourney; 3: Courtesy *Fashion Neurosis* with Bella Freud; 4: ©Cactus Jack Records/Epic Records; 5: Courtesy Christie's, New York

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Mark di Suvero: *Beethoven's Quartet*

Courtesy Everett Collection/©Utopia

Amalia Ulman at the Movies

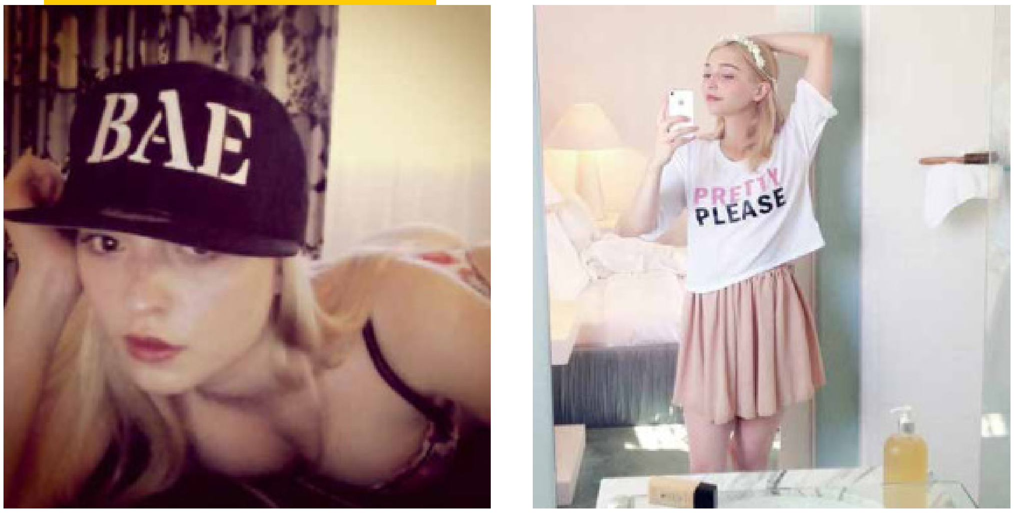
The artist discusses her pivot to film as her second feature hits theaters.

Interview by Emily Watlington

Amalia Ulman broke the internet in 2014 when she started an Instagram account for posting images of her beauty routine. There, she thanked followers for supporting her as she underwent plastic surgery and solicited opinions on her hair color and outfits. It was all a performance, soon titled *Excellences and Perfections*, designed to draw out revealing reactions and highlight the way that social media can frame women as yours to look at.

It was also a story with a narrative arc, pictures, words, and an actress – all the ingredients that make up a movie. So it should not surprise that Ulman now finds herself a rather accomplished filmmaker, with her second feature, *Magic Farm*, in theaters nationwide starting May 16. *Magic Farm* follows her dark comedy *El Planeta* (2021), in which a mother-daughter duo scam Spaniards in order to make ends (barely) meet, all while rocking fur coats and glamorous sunglasses. Ulman's new film, starring Chloë Sevigny, tells the story of a crew of American journalists traveling to Argentina to record an episode about a musician who, it turns out, lives in a different San Cristobal – a town name ubiquitous in Latin America. There, they meet memorable locals, several visibly affected by pesticide pollution. The result is an absurdist satire of American hipsters.

There's a thread connecting *Excellences and Perfections*, *El Planeta*, and *Magic Farm*, but it is not a visual or stylistic one. At first, all three seem to center on obsessions with superficial things, like beauty or online followers. But what resonates most is the social and political commentary that Ulman sneaks subtly into her work, always with a light touch – and without necessarily taking a clear stance. Below, she opens up about her big pivot between the worlds of art and film.


Amalia Ulman: *Excellences & Perfections (Instagram Update, 2nd July 2014)*, left, and *(Instagram Update, 1st June 2014)*, 2015, right.

How has it felt to go from making art, where you have your hands on every aspect, to directing big film productions?
I still have my hands on all the parts, everything from photography to costume design. That's why I'm going to stop acting in my own films – acting, directing, and producing can be truly a nightmare and more than is physically possible. On top of that, I don't even like acting that much; it tires me.

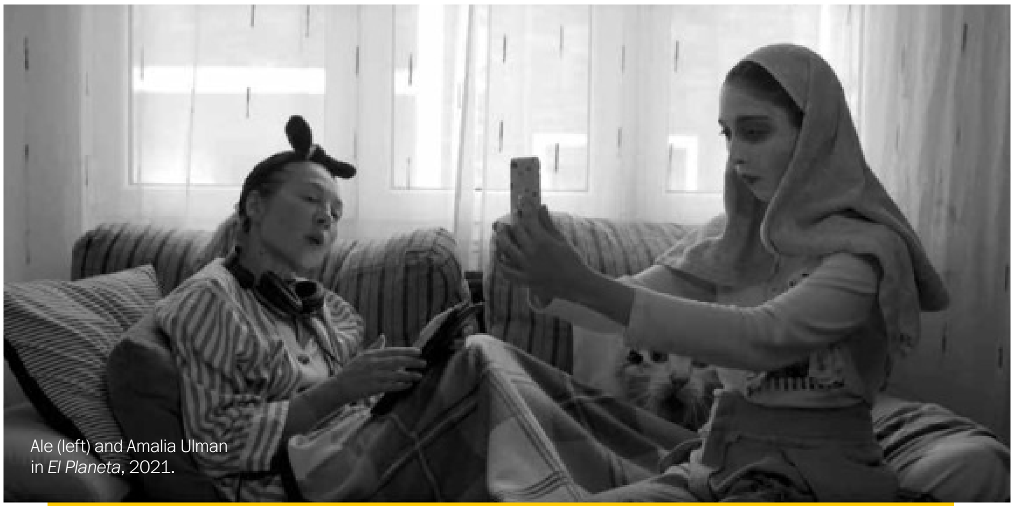
I have a very clear vision of what I want, though I love delegating when people are good at their jobs. [*Laughs*]. Which is why I think directing always starts with casting: Who do you pick to work with you that you trust?

You wrote Chloë Sevigny's part in *Magic Farm* for her, and you also worked with friends.
Yes, and my director's assistant, Carmen de la Roca, has been involved in my work since I was making video art. For *Magic Farm*, I was surrounded by people that I trust – girls that I trust, really. I started in the art world when I was very young. I was abused both financially and physically, and then I got into [a bus] accident. It was all very traumatic, and I'm not just throwing that word around. here was all this exposure, but no mentorship, no guidance. Just all these older men moving me around, and a lot of galleries thinking I might be a money cow.

But I don't work that way. I never wanted to have a large studio with a lot of people working for me. I don't even have a studio practice. I mostly work by walking around, getting on buses, looking at people, and then writing. For specific projects, I might hire some help. I quit all my galleries last year, but I haven't quit art.

The film industry is insane too. People work until they have a heart attack. But I've always been surrounded by people who care about me, and also about the longevity of my work – not just taking advantage of me. *El Planeta* was the first time that I had mentors I could call and ask, "Hey, what do you think about this?" or "How does this work?" I felt protected, and like people were rooting for me. In the art world, I felt hyper-exposed and then abandoned once I didn't do another *Excellences and Perfections*.

How did you find your mentors, and who are they?
It happened organically. In film, there's more incentive to share, because everything is so collaborative and you need people. [Fellow director] Eugene Kotlyarenko gave me the best advice ever: Get a cameo from a known actor. I got Nacho Vigalondo, who is very famous in Spain, to play the part of the john in *El Planeta*. That gave us this stamp of legitimacy. And then Miranda July sent the film to Sundance. She's also the one who got me my current agent. Scott Macaulay, the editor of *Filmmaker Magazine* but also a producer – he produced *Gummo* – is one of my best friends, and I talk to him all the time. It helps so much to able to ask, "Is this normal? Am I getting ripped off?" My friend, the director Daniel Schmidt, gives me intel regarding how much things sell for. The list of people doesn't end. I never had that in the art world.


Ale (left) and Amalia Ulman in *El Planeta*, 2021.

For an issue of *Art Papers* I edited a piece you wrote about having invisible disabilities. I noticed you included some visibly disabled people in *Magic Farm*.
What are peoples' expectations of somebody with disabilities? How do you react to somebody that looks different – like [actor] Mateo Vaquer, who I found on TikTok? I saw a video of him on the shoulders of his friend, throwing around his T-shirt at the club. He was so good at dancing. We met up when I was location-scouting, and I saw that he was very extroverted and fun, and loved the camera. I altered the script to fit him in.

Thankfully, my producers were flexible. I know from my own disability how important that is: I didn't want to give him a super-strict schedule. So I decided that, whenever he's feeling good and ready to go, we'll add him to the scene. I didn't want to force it. I know how tempting it is to lie about how well you are doing and push through. A lot of the stories that he tells in the film are stories that he just brought up during lunch. I wanted him to represent himself the way he is. You can be disabled and also be super-sassy and love drugs or whatever! Yet whenever you see people that look like Mateo onscreen, it's a scary film. I just wanted to normalize it all.

In the film he's disabled because of pesticide poisoning. You also had family members whose health was affected by agricultural chemicals.
Harm is everywhere. That's what the film is

From top: Deborah Schamoni, Munich (2); Courtesy Everett Collection/©Utopia

Stills from Ulman's latest film *Magic Farm*, 2025, showing Chloë Sevigny (top) and Alex Wolff and Camila del Campo (above).

> I stopped trusting the galleries and started doing my own thing.

really about: There is no escape. It's not like the Americans will go back home and then be safe. My mom's side of the family – my grandma is in the film! – is part Indigenous, from Northern Argentina. In the '70s, there was a mass exodus from the countryside to Buenos Aires. Most of the family moved, but a few people stayed in the countryside. One person was going blind, but nobody wanted to talk about it. My mom was outraged: Where were the activists?

Part of the problem is that it's hard to prove a culprit scientifically, since it can affect everyone differently – cancer, a missing limb. It takes a serious study to start seeing patterns, and these studies are rare in small villages. Plus, when you're sick, the idea of fighting against multinational monsters is a lot.

You have your own production company, Holga's Meow – named for your late cat.
It's partly a way for me to get credit for the production work that I do, but I also want the company to start funding smaller projects. I want to help other women and younger people coming from the art world. I learned from my own experience that a little guidance can go a long way. I want it to be like Elara Pictures [a production company cofounded by the Safdie brothers and others] for girls. Elara is very bro-y.

Did you always see yourself making films?
I've always been very narrative, but I never really thought I could make a film. I knew the way I liked to work made my life hard as an artist. I work project to project, on things that have a clear beginning and end. But when one picture from a series would get shown out of context, it was hard for some people to understand, and hard to market. At least when there's an excerpt or screenshot from a film, you know you're missing context.

A lot of your characters have somewhat glamorous or exciting lives but are struggling financially, which is a lot like working in the art world. Do the working conditions of the film industry feel different?
In film, there are unions that make sure everyone gets paid. Sometimes I butt heads with the unions, especially when it comes to disability, because they make things less flexible. But at the end of the day, I'm happy that people get a living wage. Also, since film is more collaborative, burning bridges is risky. You can't be too big a douchebag, because you'll need to ask favors of other people. In film, you need protections like insurance on set in case someone gets hurt. But in the art world, I went to so many fairs with so many galleries and never felt protected, even when I devoted my whole life to a project. In fashion and in art, people suffer – and do a lot of Adderall and cocaine just to sustain what they are doing.

In the art world, I felt like I was having to prove myself to galleries over and over again. When I felt confident about an idea, it would usually sell – even things that are supposed to be hard to sell! Whereas some things that galleries pushed me to do, thinking that they'd be more commercially viable, didn't sell. I stopped trusting the galleries and started doing my own thing.

What's your next film about?
It's based on a short story I wrote called "The German Teacher." It's set in Spain, and based on a real private debt collection agency, El Cobrador del Frac, that you can hire. They send a guy in coattails and a top hat to follow you around, and everyone knows what it means. He trails you and shames you, until you pay. In my story, the government implements a law requiring every company to diversify. So the protagonist becomes the first female *cobradora*. The man she's hired to follow happens to be this German teacher she had an affair with when she was in high school – and hadn't seen since ... ●

Courtesy Spacemaker (2)

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Hilary Waters Fayle, work in progress for *Portraits of Place* series, collected botanical materials on acrylic

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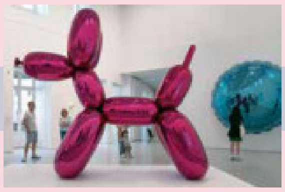

Jeff Koons vs. **Forensic Architecture**

Old Faithful

Art Basel vs. **Venice Biennale**

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Loud colorful paintings vs. **Long didactic videos**

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Deep-pocketed collector vs. **Globe-trotting curator**

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Basel Social Club vs. **Bukhara Biennial**

Zwirner: Photo Galuschka/ullstein bild via Getty; Szeemann: Photo Oed/ullstein bild via Getty; Money: Adobe Stock; Golden Lion: Photo Felix Hörhager/Picture Alliance via Getty; Koons: Photo Luc Castel via Getty; Forensic Architecture: Photo Daniel Leal/AFP via Getty; Art Basel: Courtesy Art Basel; Venice: Courtesy Venice Biennale; On Trend/Sad Snacks: Adobe Stock (4); Basel Social Club: Courtesy Basel Social Club; Bukhara Biennial: Courtesy Bukhara Biennial

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You can also find TLACAELEL with Michael Gorman at ART SANTA FE, July 11th -13th at the Santa Fe Convention Center, booth 508.

Or online at www.TlacaelelFuentes.com

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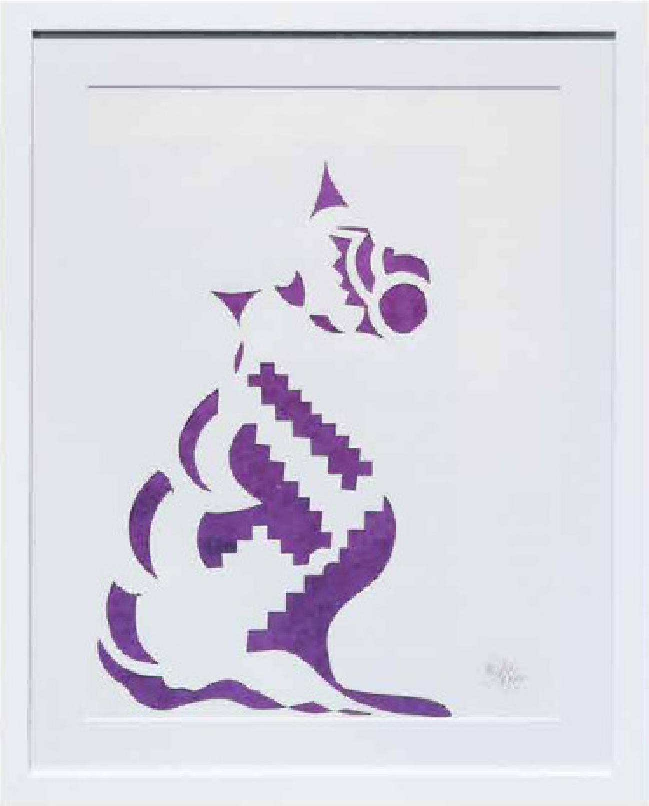
MILLICENT ROGERS MUSEUM



Xoloitzcuintli - The Mexican hiarless dog is regarded in Azteca culture as the guardian and guide of thier owners in the afterlife.

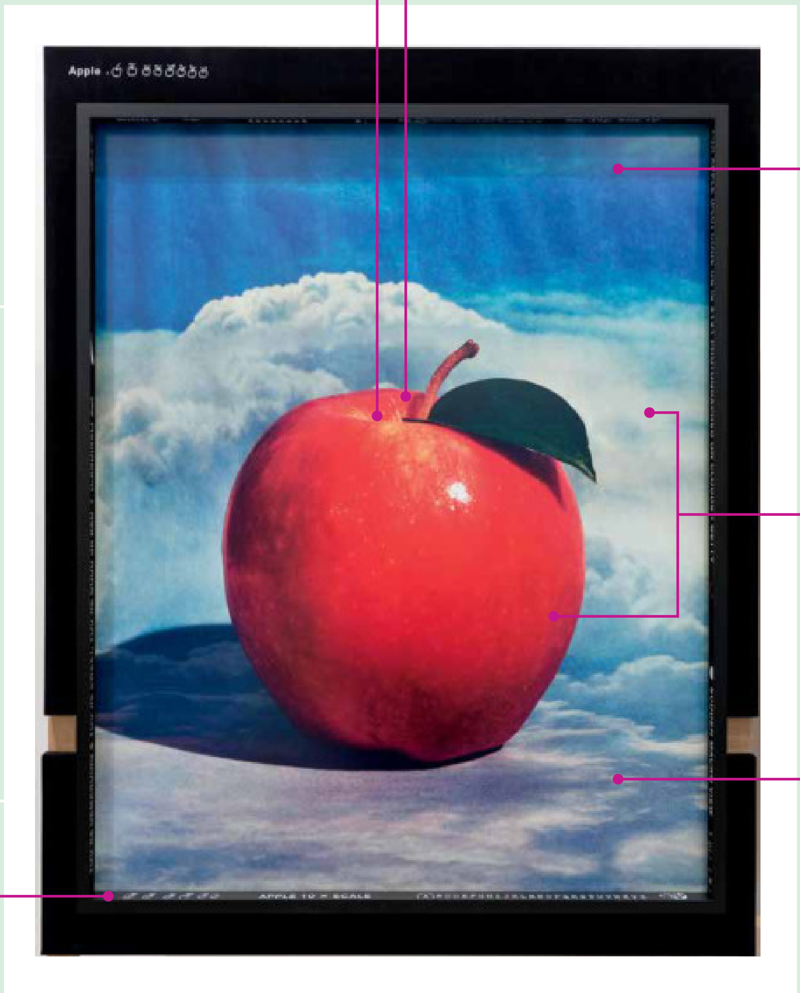
Original papel picado by TLACAELEL.

Apple on Sky I

Sara Cwynar's *Apple on Sky I* (2024) is one of 26 works included in *Alphabet* (2025), an installation project conceived as part of an exhibition at ICA Boston. The works in *Alphabet* feature images relating to popular internet search terms and words drawn from the artist's own online activities. Some images have been collected (like an X-ray of Marilyn Monroe's torso), while others (such as *Apple on Sky I*) were staged and photographed by Cwynar herself.

The Fuji apple that Cwynar chose to photograph "was the first one I picked up when I walked into the grocery store," she told *Art in America*. "I wanted to let the process of shopping guide me. I liked that it seems to come from the other side of the world and nods to the trajectory of objects traveling to your hand."

To make the apple look especially idyllic, Cwynar, who was at one time art director of the food pages for the *New York Times*, "added Vaseline and did some classic product-photography tricks to make it appear shinier."



The sky background is from a source picture pulled from Getty Images. Cwynar said she found its seemingly perfect appearance slightly ominous, the cloud formations resembling the mushroom clouds produced by nuclear explosions.

In *Alphabet*, Cwynar grapples with the long-term impact of imagery used in advertising. "They've transformed all these people into objects," she said of another related work that focuses on e-commerce fashion photos, an essay in *The Cut* by model Emily Ratajkowski about not having the rights to images of herself.

Together, the apple and the skyscape recall Surrealist dream motifs made popular by René Magritte, whose work Cwynar cited as an influence on her work related to photography, collage, installation, and bookmaking.

Cwynar's *Alphabet* installation project, of which *Apple on Sky I* is a part, was inspired by Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924–29), in which the art historian and cultural theorist grouped images from antiquity and considered how they were used later in history.

"The paper that it's [printed] on has this crumpling from the printer—it's a little bit rumpled," Cwynar said. "I kept some things in [the work] that make it clear that these are imperfect. At the same time, I tried to make everything look as aesthetically appealing as possible."

Apple on Sky I is hung in a silkscreen frame, with poetic lines and utilitarian information printed on the border of the frame. It reads, for example, YOU'RE DEMANDING & YOU'RE SWEET, YOU'RE GOOD UR BAD, alongside the SKU number from the grocery store. Cwynar said the information, visible only from certain angles, can change viewers' perceptions of something as familiar as an apple.

Courtesy The Approach, London; Cooper Cole, Toronto; and 52 Walker, New York

—*Interview by Francesca Aton*

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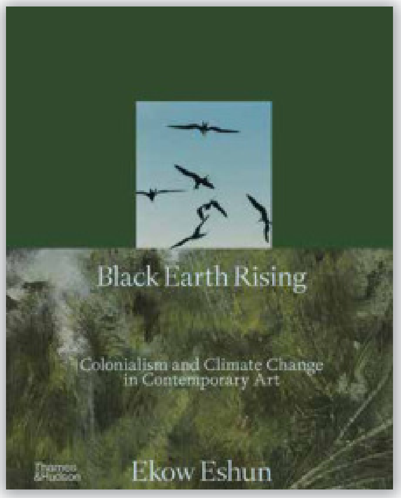
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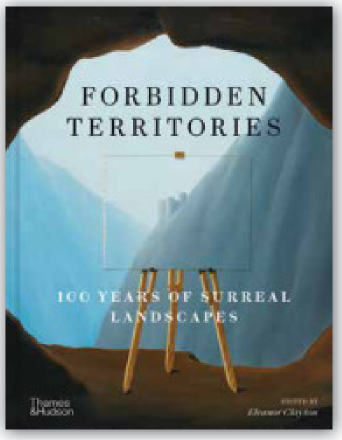
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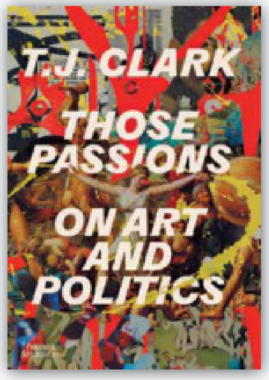
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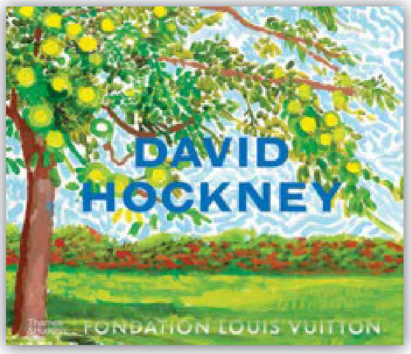
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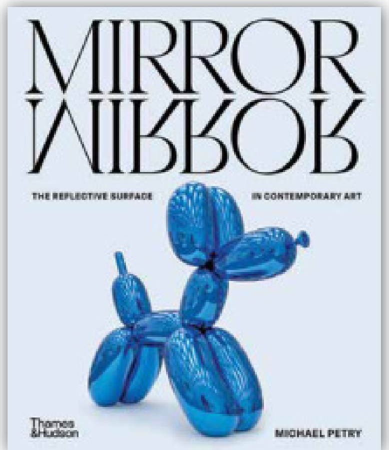
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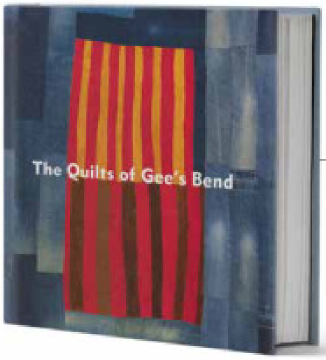
Self-Taught Artists

The arduous work of reclaiming self-taught makers from constraining and demeaning categories like "outsider artist" gained momentum early in the 21st century, when groundbreaking publications by curators, critics, and scholars made a case against that outworn classification. As these books demonstrate, self-taught artists, far from being solipsistic and hermetic, seek to engage communities real or imaginary.

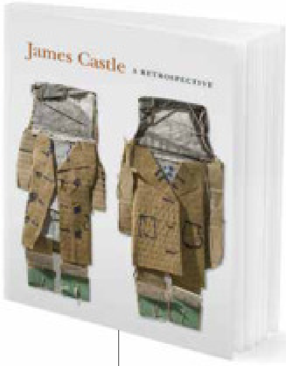
by Lynne Cooke



MUST READ

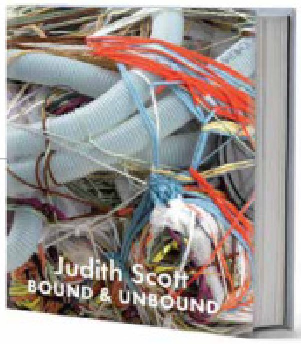
The Quilts of Gee's Bend

Impassioned collector William Arnett was the force behind the exhibition "The Quilts of Gee's Bend" and its accompanying catalog, filled with lavish illustrations, informative social history, and detailed biographies. Defying tradition, the textiles' spare compositions feature blocks of bold colors in rhythmic interplay. In 2002, when the show debuted at the Whitney Museum of American Art, it became an overnight sensation, heralding a transformative shift. Critics acclaimed the functional artifacts, designed and sewn by poor Black women living in rural Alabama, as among the finest abstract art created in the United States.



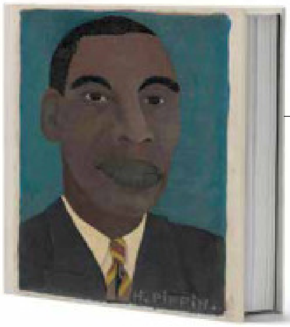
James Castle: A Retrospective

Based in rigorous archival research and scientific studies of materials and techniques, the essays in *James Castle: A Retrospective,* including those by curator Ann Percy and conservators Nancy Ash and Scott Homolka, meet the highest standards of art historical scholarship. That such a richly illustrated catalog was devoted to a reclusive unknown artist lacking a substantial exhibition history was noteworthy when this book was published in 2008—and remains so today. Even more significant is that, by documenting and bringing classificatory order to thousands of undated works on paper, this seminal publication established Castle among the giants of 20th-century American art.



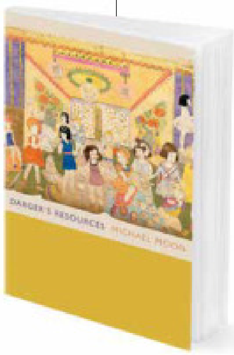
Judith Scott: Bound & Unbound

Starting in her mid-40s, Judith Scott produced abstract sculpture for more than a decade by binding, tying, and knotting woolen yarn around improvised armatures of ready-to-hand materials. In the 2014–15 Brooklyn Museum exhibition that occasioned this publication, cocurators Catherine Morris and Matthew Higgs resisted the well-entrenched tendency to interpret symptomatically the practices of creators like Scott, with mental, physical, and/or developmental disabilities. That game-changing strategy, which effectively positioned her sculpture in the context of contemporary art, also informs the illuminating essays and extensive documentation in the catalog (to which I contributed).



Horace Pippin, American Modern

Although Horace Pippin (1888–1946) was the most successful African American artist of his day, he is currently deemed an outsider. Through close study of key subjects in his work, many centered on Black life and history, art historian Anne Monahan reinstates his now-forgotten professional stature. Disabled in World War I, Pippin taught himself to paint in the 1930s and mastered not just his craft but the protocols necessary to a successful artistic career. Published in 2020, Monahan's fascinating revisionist account tracks his ascent, followed by the eclipse of his reputation due to the rise of postwar abstraction. More troubling is the delegitimation Pippin subsequently suffered by way of his marginalization as a "folk" artist.



Darger's Resources

Published in 2012, this revelatory monograph offers a redemptive, compassionate portrait of Henry Darger, an obsessive creator as often pathologized as he is mythologized. Drawing on queer studies and literary archives, cultural historian Michael Moon situates Darger's visionary tales starring the Vivian Girls—whose pastoral idylls are constantly interrupted by horrific sexual predation—in relation to the efflorescence of working-class print culture in the interwar years. As Moon brilliantly shows, Darger's fictional narratives, conceived as allegories of slavery, were vested in children's books, biblical tracts, comics, pulp fiction, and American history.

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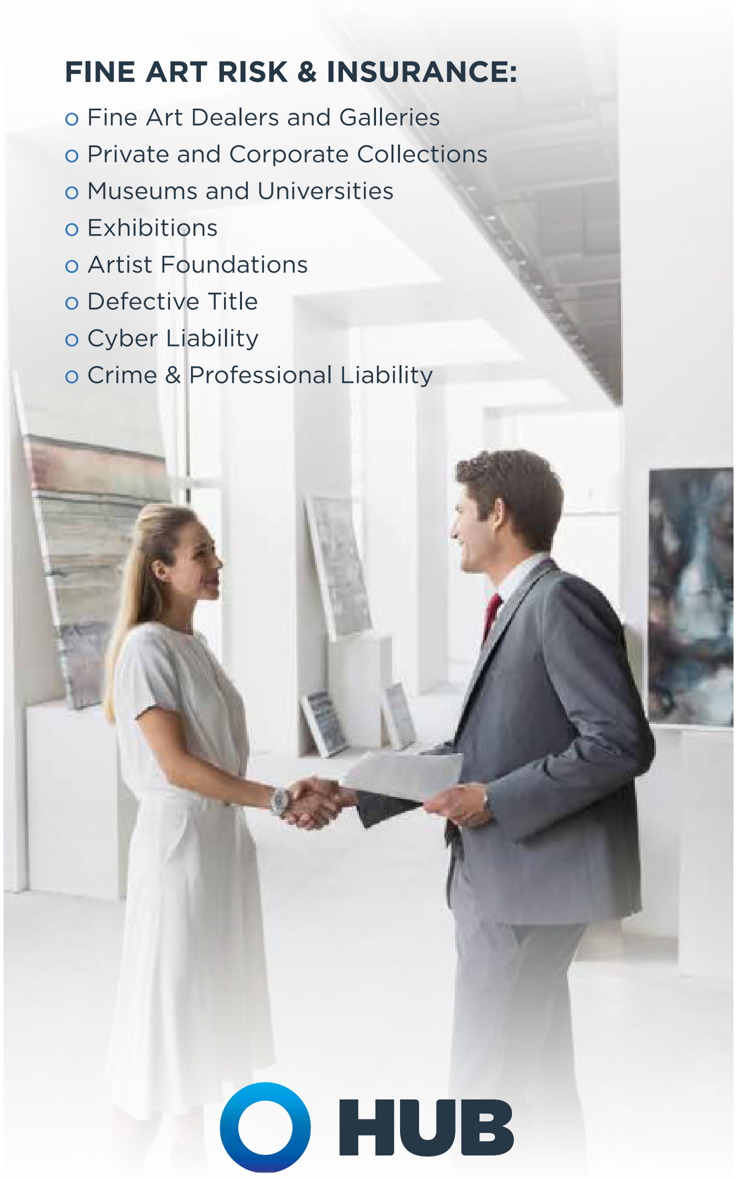

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Geometric abstractions and delicate dot drawings, blending traditional influences with modern forms

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CITY OF SANTA FE ARTS & CULTURE

Image: Suzanne Kite (Oglála Lakȟóta), *Listener*, 2018.
Performance in Linz, Austria. Photo credit: vog.photo

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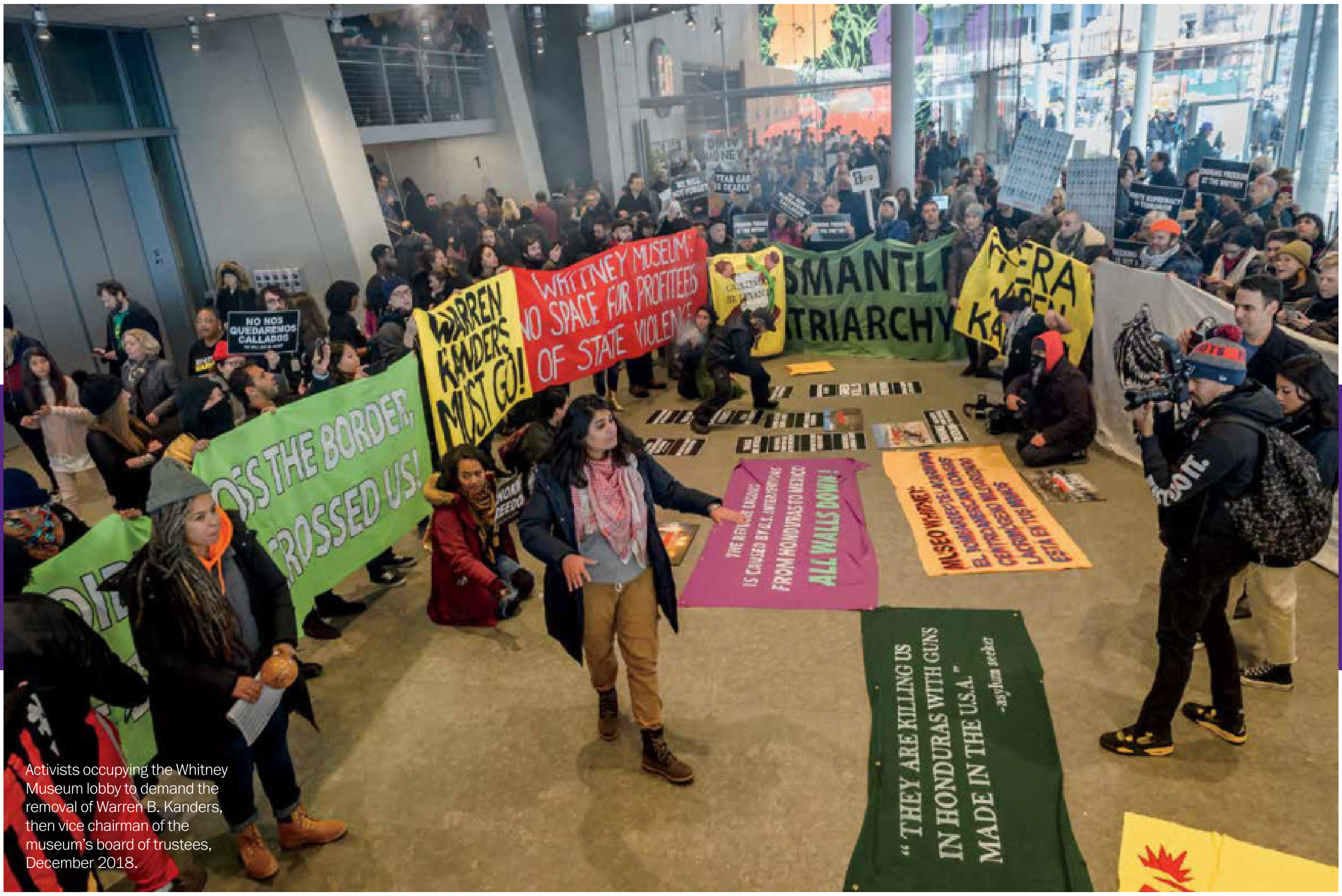

WHITNEY MUSEUM: NO SPACE FOR PROFITEERS OF STATE VIOLENCE
WARREN KANDERS MUST GO!
...OSS THE BORDER, ...ROSSED US!
NO NOS QUEDAREMOS CALLADOS
...SMANTLE ...TRIARCHY
"THEY ARE KILLING US IN HONDURAS WITH GUNS MADE IN THE U.S.A." -asylum seeker
ALL WALLS DOWN!
FROM HONDURAS TO MEXICO
DIRTY MONEY
TEAR GAS IS DEADLY

Activists occupying the Whitney Museum lobby to demand the removal of Warren B. Kanders, then vice chairman of the museum's board of trustees, December 2018.

Photo Erik McGregor/LightRocket via Getty

Disobedience Avalanche

How to be a culture worker in times like these.

by Laura Raicovich

As a Gen Xer, I grew up with the mantra "think globally, act locally." Today, however, the tsunami of antidemocratic and oligarchic actions inundating the United States and many other geographies is decidedly global, overwhelmingly so. The trickle-up potential that acting locally once promised has clearly failed.

To fight back, we will need a polyphony of divergent yet parallel efforts. This will require us to reinvent culture work, transforming it so that we might look closely at deeply held "truths," even when they provide comfort, and at long-maintained methods and behaviors that no longer serve us.

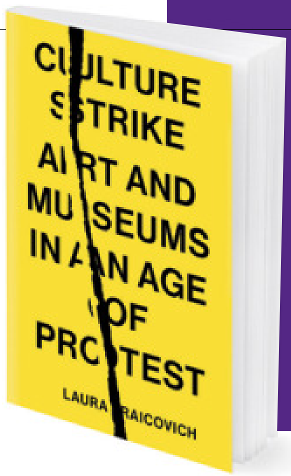
How is a culture worker to contribute in times like these? What follows is a lesson I learned during Trump's first term. When I resigned my role as director of the Queens Museum in 2018 over a variety of problematic events that unfolded in the aftermath of Trump's first election, I had to face a difficult reality: In the midst of a stressful period toward the end of my tenure, my husband said to me, "You may never work at a museum again." I felt as if I had been kicked in the stomach, the air knocked from my lungs. Having spent 20 years inside cultural organizations, this seemed an impossible outcome. It challenged my vision of myself, my identity, and how I thought I might contribute to the world. Who would I be if not a culture worker laboring inside museums and other arts nonprofits? I knew the liberal model of singular leadership at the helm of institutions was deeply flawed; any culture worker knows that the work of institutions is a profoundly collective act masked by the hierarchies of organizational charts and inequitable pay. And yet this was the only work ecology I knew; my imagination was limited by my own life experience.

Yet the more I thought about it, the more I knew that this was exactly the choice I had to make. I had to break from a situation in which I could not hold the values I prioritized. Perhaps I could realize some of the ways I'd wanted the institution to function outside its walls.

Thus began a trajectory that has brought me far more than I could have imagined in that gut-punch moment that broke open my imagination to the possibilities of working otherwise. I hope it has also broadened the ways I contribute to the urgencies around me. Not all change results from as dramatic a set of circumstances as those I experienced at the Queens Museum, but the seismic shift in my day-to-day work made me vastly more attuned to the various complicities I had been negotiating every day at the museum. It also made me see my world anew, levering open a whole set of imaginaries about what is possible in cultural work.

Shortly thereafter, in 2019, the Warren Kanders controversy unfolded at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Kanders had served as vice-chair of the Whitney's board while he owned a military gear company called Safariland that sold body armor, tear gas, and such with the tag line "less lethal solutions." Once artists and culture workers learned that the tear gas Safariland produced was being used against asylum seekers at the US border with Mexico; against Black Lives Matter protesters in Ferguson, Missouri; and in Palestine against everyone, they led the movement to have him removed from the board.

What unfolded in the aftermath of these revelations holds a valuable model for how change transpires. In my book, *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest* (2023), I wrote about how the microcosm of change that manifested at the Whitney did not align with hierarchical theories of change. Rather, in this situation, journalists were writing critical articles; staff were questioning their roles at the museum and making their concerns known to its leadership; activists staged protests in the public spaces of the museum and elsewhere; many unknowable conversations and conflicts ensued behind the scenes; and several artists demanded their works be withdrawn from the Whitney



Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest, by Laura Raicovich, New York, Verso Books, 2023.

E 42 ST
HOLLAND TUNNEL
CLEAR FIRE LANE FOR EMERGENCY VEHICLES
FREE HUEY
DON'T WALK

Members of the Black Panther Party marching in New York, en route to a news conference at the United Nations Plaza to protest the murder trial of Black Panther Huey P. Newton in Oakland, Calif., 1968.

SANDERS Realty Co.
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

Constancia Romilly, aka "Dinky," outside the headquarters of SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) in Atlanta, 1964.

National Guard troops blocking Beale Street in Memphis during the Memphis sanitation workers' strike, 1968.

Clockwise from top: Courtesy Verso Books, New York; Courtesy the Bettmann Archive via Getty (2); Courtesy the Express Picture Library via Getty

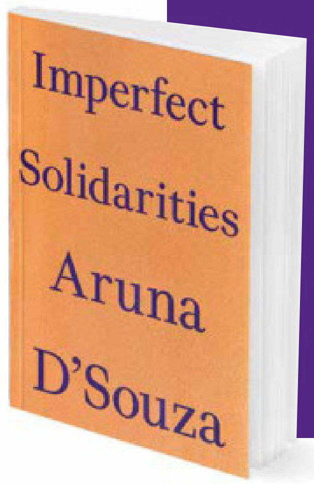
Biennial. Some of the people involved in these actions overlapped, others did not: In fact, many were skeptical if not downright hostile to the tactics employed by others. And yet, Kanders eventually resigned his position, in response to these collectively generated pressures. A variety of tactics, working in parallel yet not in tandem, produced pressure and power.

All this made me think back to a conversation I had years ago with Rhoda Rosen, a white Jewish South African woman who had been part of the African National Congress (ANC) in its fight to end apartheid. She recounted being surprised by the timing of the regime's fall: It happened amid disagreements over tactics, at a time when she felt as though the internal unity of the resistance was becoming atomized and dispersed. It was then that the wall of apartheid fell. And so it was for the US Civil Rights movement. The sheer variety of groups working sometimes in concert but more often in parallel with one another was remarkable: There was the NAACP, the Black Panther Party, SNCC, SCLC, the Nation of Islam, the Weather Underground, and CORE, among others – often taking fundamentally divergent approaches and tactics. And yet, change came.

As a culture, and particularly within movement-building, there is strength in heterogeneity. The friction between differing lived realities and tactical approaches makes the overall message stronger. It makes space for more people to enter the fray. Productive conflicts can emerge to strengthen positions. Working in parallel rather than explicitly collaborating has the effect of resisting the flattening of messages into sound bites. It allows perspectives to exist in all their complexity, and encourages solidarities to form in spite of difference. If we honor the advantages of being uncoordinated, might we also alleviate the proverbial "circular firing squad"?

Amid a profusion of attacks on free speech, human rights, and civil liberties; the dismantling of basic public goods and services; and threats to a democratic and Constitutional order, our individual and collective responses are increasingly urgent. Many of us are asking ourselves deep questions about how to act, both personally and within institutional work. To avoid consequences, should we pre-conform to restrictions we believe are coming? Do we opt for sleight of hand over overt resistance in order to protect what we have, to survive to fight another day? Or do we disobey? Take the bigger risk, make the bolder statement, resist openly – possibly inviting greater retribution?

If democracy and freedom are at stake to the degree I and many others believe they are, we have no other choice but to resist, to refuse compliance with what we know is unjust. The contributions of cultural and knowledge institutions to democracy means that they must hold powerful, even "dangerous" ideas. This is also why they become targets. What role do they perform under autocracy and oligarchy? There is no museum or library that can fulfill its stated mission in the absence of self-determination and an active civil society. Without these, their reasons for existing collapse, obviating their social and educational functions. Resistance may take many forms, but what is essential is that we enact a refusal to obey, and particularly to refuse to pre-comply with what we imagine *might* be coming. How we each might do that and in what circumstances is where the finesse lies.



Imperfect Solidarities, by Aruna D'Souza, Berlin, Floating Opera Press, 2024.

I want to suggest that a multiplicity of resistances is most likely to produce the change we need. These can come together only via networks of solidarity drawn from shared interests, permanent or temporary. Which does not mean we'll agree with or even understand our allies fully. In her recent and important book, *Imperfect Solidarities*, Aruna D'Souza makes the case for honoring the reality of incomprehension, highlighting this condition as a strategy for survival as well as for more complex and effective solidarities. She writes, "To be able to act together without full comprehension, to be able to float on the seas of change: What would a politics based on that capacity look like?"

While I don't know the answer to this question, it is clear that a perfectly harmonized chorus is not possible, and is potentially undesirable. After all, homogeneity is exactly what demagoguery desires. A polyphonic chorus can say so much more.

One of the more demoralizing aspects of the current moment is the way that what's coming seems to be a *fait accompli*. How might we make *justice* seem inevitable instead? It won't happen by way of a universally-agreed-upon, least-common-denominator approach: That is a recipe for failure. Rather, through a cacophonous pileup of disobedience, we too can become inevitable. ●

LIVING
BILLIONAIRES OUT
WORKERS IN
WORKERS OVER
BILLIONAIRES!

A rally against the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) outside the Department of Labor in Washington, D.C., February 2025.

From top: Courtesy Floating Opera Press, Berlin; Photo Kena Betancur/VIEWpress via Getty

1940

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith

2025

The Native American artist made her voice—and those of so many others—heard.

by Emmi Whitehorse

Photo Thomas King

Though she faced an uphill battle at every turn, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith had the motivation and drive to work tirelessly to make her voice heard, along with those of other Native women artists. Jaune was a great teacher who encouraged anyone struggling with navigating the art world. She actively sought out Native artists for shows she curated, and employed young writers to help with the many catalogs and books she compiled. She was constantly moving, giving talks, attending conferences, and networking. She would take a daytrip from New Mexico to New York to check out museum shows and visit galleries—then fly back home to the Land of Enchantment on the red-eye!

Jaune's art reflected this same energy. An endless flow of information, both good and bad, poured out of her as fast as she could paint. While paint dripped down the canvas, she plastered over it with collage and then more paint, building layer upon layer, completely in the moment. While her work was always in dialogue with old and new art, she felt strongly that her creative process was connected to her traditional tribal ways, including prepping, tanning, and dying hides. Jaune's marks were made with a contemporary eye but informed by the land on which she grew up and the utilitarian objects her father created and collected, like lariat braids and the traditional beadwork that he wore.

Despite her intensity and drive, Jaune always mixed humor into her passion for historical truth and her endless pursuit to shed light on the omissions and blatant oversight of the Native American perspective in contemporary art. Jaune's persistence paid off, and we are all indebted to her focus on broadening minds that were fixed in a Eurocentric approach to art history.

When I think back to Jaune's influence on me in the early days, one episode involving a conservative art professor we shared at the University of New Mexico stands out. Feeling the pressure to produce a beautifully painted canvas to impress our teacher, Jaune took a roll of raw canvas, cut it into the shape of an animal hide, and threw it in the washing machine with Rit clothing dye. After the distorted canvas had dried into a wrinkled mess, she proceeded to hang it over the top of two wooden poles she found at a hardware store. The confidence she showed in presenting such a work—which broke all norms and expectations at the time—is one of the things I admire most about Jaune, and it gave me the courage to stand up for my own original ideas with the confidence that I was standing on solid ground.

Jaune's confidence in her work extended to her ability to insert herself into the 1980s-era feminist art scene in New York. At that time, Miriam Schapiro and Harmony Hammond introduced her to current art trends, from "women's work" like crocheting, embroidering, and needlework to large-scale "masculine" sculpture by the likes of Jackie Winsor. Both Jaune and I also became involved with Peter Jemison at the American Indian Community House in New York, which helped us negotiate the art world and gain some exposure. As an 18-year-old hanging around with Jaune, my eyes were wide open, and she introduced me to an array of trailblazing artists and their ideas.

Jaune and I came together at a fortunate time, seemingly fated to meet and share a lifelong friendship. In the beginning, when I arrived at university straight from high school, I was just 17 and must have tested her patience, sorely at times. But she was always there for me.

Over the decades that we were friends, Jaune's activism and comradery helped hone my vision to break the surface of what feels like a large body of water with my art. I've stayed the course I chose, expanding that vision in every painting I've made, and I owe part of that to Jaune and all the wisdom and support she showed me and so many other artists of our time. ●

Courtesy Centre Pompidou, Paris

Suzanne Valadon's Sense of Selves

The French painter celebrated changes in a modernizing Paris and within herself.

by Kelly Presutti

Suzanne Valadon's painterly style was brash and unflinching. She was self-taught, gleaning tips and techniques from the painters for whom she modeled, and she did not shy away from harsh colors. An 1898 self-portrait places green shadows across her forehead and chin to create a vivid contrast with the glaring reddish tones that dominate the composition. She returned to herself as a subject repeatedly, and in another self-portrait from 1931, appears as a bare-breasted 66-year-old with the same resolute gaze and piercing expression as her younger self. Despite Valadon's proximity to artists investigating abstraction, including Picasso and Matisse, she remained – firmly, even stubbornly – committed to representation throughout her career.

A recent swell of attention devoted to the French painter – the subject of six major exhibitions in as many years, including a 200-work retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in Paris through May 26 – has generated no clear conclusions about Valadon's place within the history of art. The Pompidou show, revealingly, has no subtitle: It is simply "Suzanne Valadon." A previous exhibition at the institution's Metz location declared the artist to be in "A World of Her Own," both celebrating and isolating her contributions. A 2021 exhibition at Philadelphia's Barnes Foundation subtitled "Model, Painter, Rebel" signaled the multiple roles the artist played in her lifetime.

While failing to characterize Valadon's work definitively, these titles are an improvement on the historical telling of her story. Valadon (1865–1938), who came of age in the heady world of Montmartre's cabaret scene, achieved commercial success as an artist in her lifetime. But she fell under the shadow of her artist son, Maurice Utrillo. When she has been written about, it is often in reference to the male artists with whom she associated. Books dedicated to Valadon refer to her as *The Mistress of Montmartre* and *Renoir's Dancer.* Even the name by which we know her, Suzanne, was based on her bodily availability to the male gaze – after Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec compared Valadon, who was then a popular model called Maria (born Marie-Clémentine), to the biblical story of Susanna and the Elders.

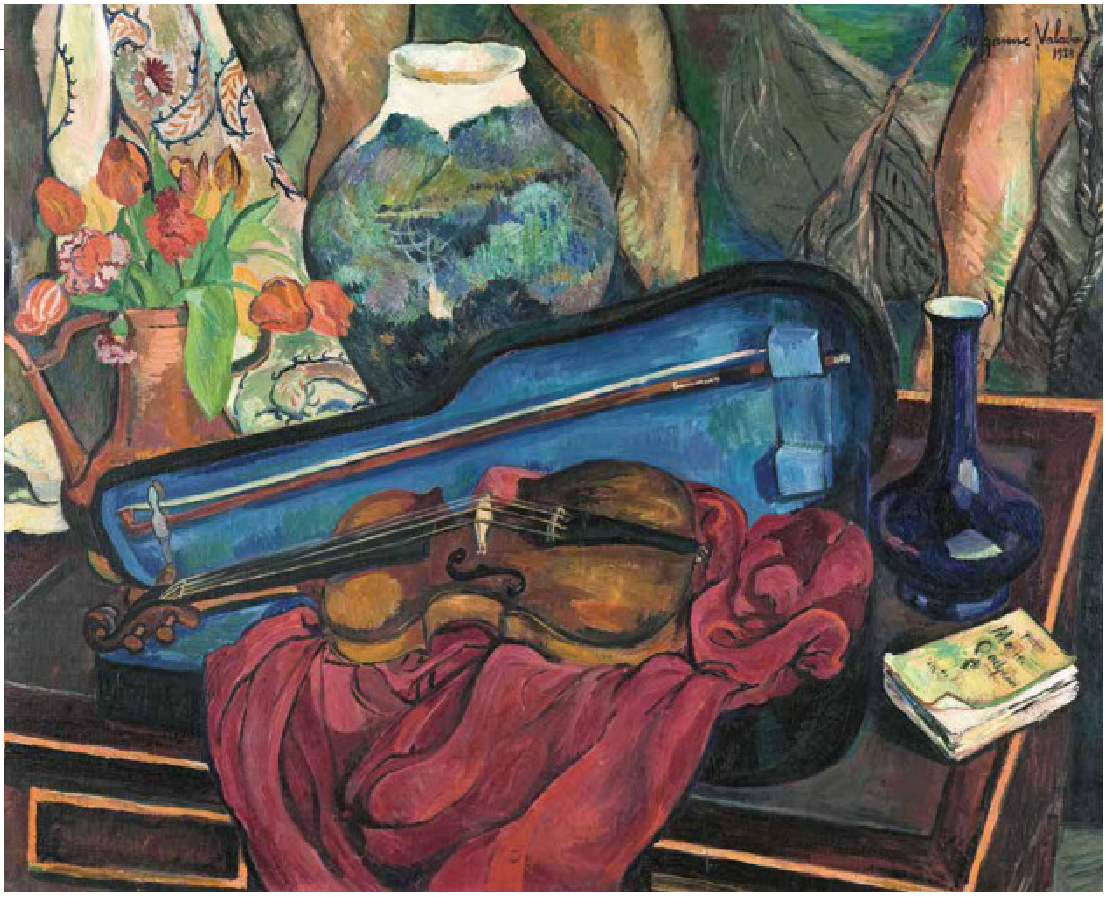
The recent exhibitions, in focusing on Valadon's art rather than her personal life or modeling career, reveal a broader shift in the art world toward prioritizing female agency. In her iconic essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," one of Linda Nochlin's explanations for the lack was propriety: Women were not permitted to study the male body, the most vaunted subject of 19th-century academic painting. Perhaps, then, this explains the fascination with Valadon's representations of nudes, which have featured heavily in every recent exhibition and publication about her work.

Rendering naked figures was Valadon's most blatant assumption of her own power. *Adam and Eve* (1909), a thinly veiled portrait of Valadon and her future (second) husband André Utter, is often hailed as the first representation of a naked man by a female artist. With its slender figures laced with sinewy muscles, the painting proves Valadon was comfortable with the human body in all its flawed reality (the fig leaves for modesty were a later, unwelcome, addition). A slew of Valadon's portraits of female models includes soft bellies, sharp collar bones, and visible body hair, and the recent exhibitions of her work celebrate her unidealized approach to this canonical art subject.

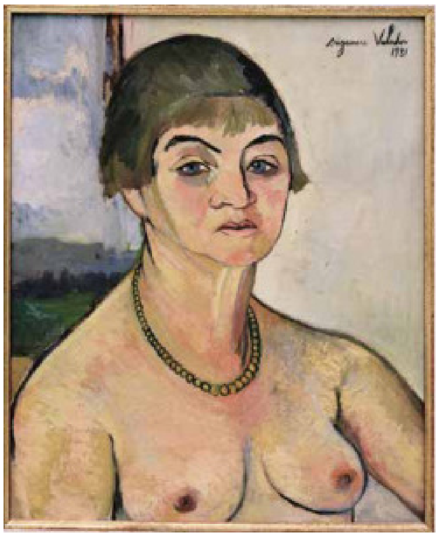
But Nochlin was calling for much more than simply adding female artists to the existing canon and modes of representation. She saw the absence of significant female figures in art history as a "crucial question of the discipline as a whole" – one that, once answered, might transform the field and "challenge traditional divisions of intellectual inquiry." Valadon's revolutionary potential for art history lies not in her essential femaleness but instead in her participation in a radical milieu during a formative moment in the modern city of Paris. Her work speaks not only to the history of art but also to the emergence of mass culture at a time when so-called high art and popular representation became inextricably intertwined.

Valadon was not just female but poor. Her mother was a laundress in a small town in western France, her father unknown to her. The two came to Paris around 1866, settling in the working-class district of Montmartre a few short years before the arrival of both war and popular revolution. Valadon, only 4 years old when Prussian troops invaded the city, was sent to live with an aunt in Nantes. She missed the siege and the Commune that came after, but returned to a city marked by the scars of battle and a neighborhood characterized by revolt.

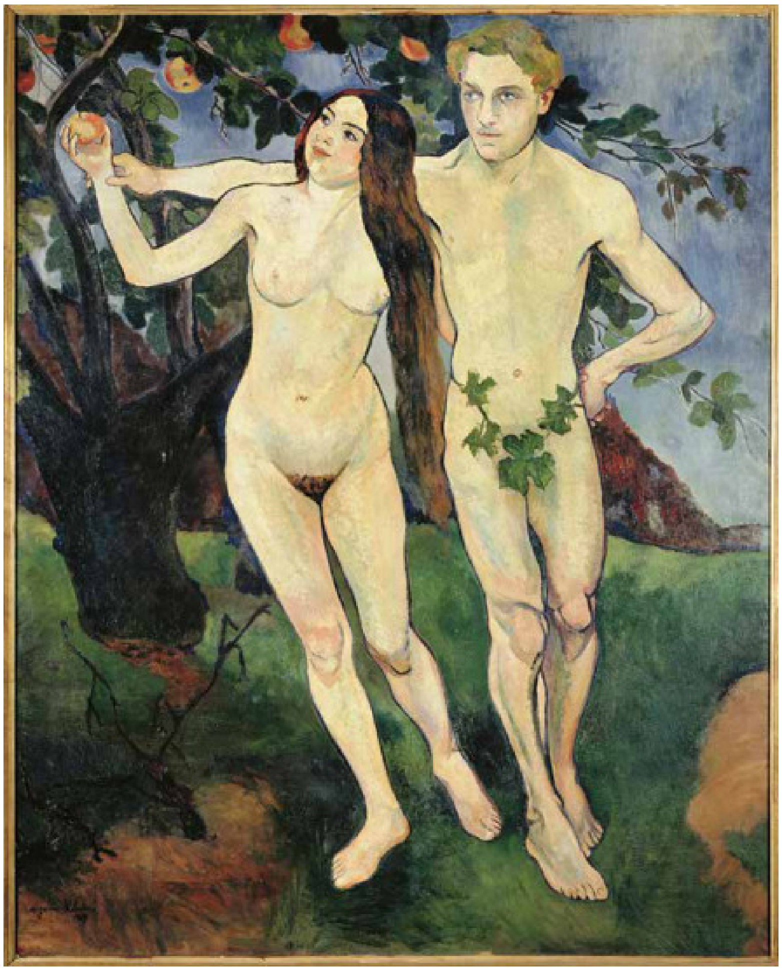
That defiant spirit fueled Valadon as she made her way in life, working odd jobs, modeling, and drawing for her own pleasure. She became a single mother at age 18 to Maurice Utrillo, giving him the last name



The Violin Box, 1923.



Suzanne Valadon: *Self-portrait with Bare Breasts*, 1931.



Adam and Eve, 1909.

Clockwise from top left: ©Akg-images; Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, Paris; Courtesy Centre Pompidou, Paris

of a Spanish journalist who was a friend. Marriage to a banker in 1896 afforded her the opportunity to focus on painting, but the partnership dissolved when Valadon later began an affair with André Utter, who was Maurice's friend. That she became a successful artist despite these circumstances testifies not only to her determination (which critics often coded as "virile" and "masculine") but also to the possibilities for social mobility in the rapidly changing world of late 19th-century Paris.

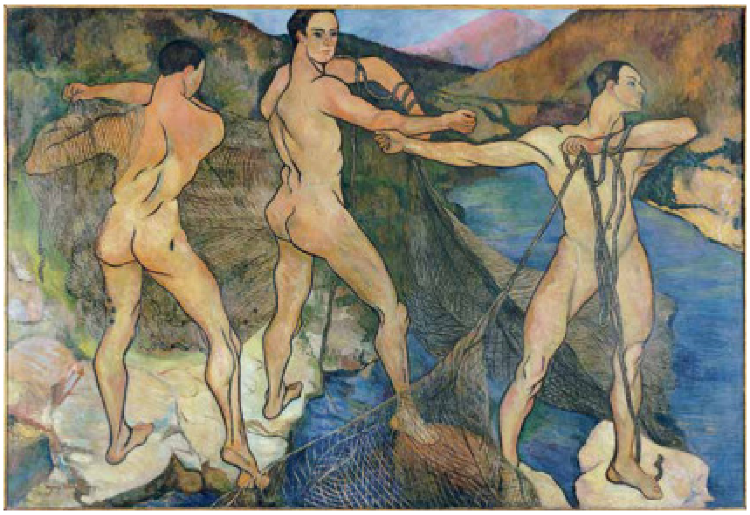
Valadon was working on the cusp of 20th-century modernity, a period of profound transformation in where and how people lived and the opportunities they enjoyed for leisure and pleasure. Montmartre experienced an influx of residents displaced from the gentrifying center of Paris, notably the community of artists who would provide Valadon's initial livelihood as well as entertainers – including some at a circus, at which she claims to have performed – who would make her life so lively.

Nearby neighborhoods also welcomed arrivals from France's overseas colonies, contributing to a growing demographic of people of color that art historian Denise Murrell has traced in her work on 19th-century Paris. Valadon captured, obliquely, one aspect of this changing city in a series of five portraits of a Black model painted in 1919. When two of the paintings went on view at the Barnes Foundation in 2021, the museum convened and published a roundtable of scholars including Murrell and Ebonie Pollock (whose undergraduate thesis first brought the paintings to scholarly attention).

As part of the roundtable, Adrienne Childs cautioned against reading the images as free of the racism that defined Valadon's time and that mars the long history of depictions of Black women. But Valadon, having worked as a model herself, may have been uniquely capable of understanding aspects of the Black woman's experience, registering an embodied empathy for the tension in the figure's left arm, which supports her weight, or the strain on her right, holding an apple steadily aloft as Valadon herself had in *Adam and Eve*. Times were changing, and Valadon was both benefiting from and recording that change.

Valadon's capacity for appreciating change makes the still lifes she produced in the 1920s and '30s feel especially fresh. Like the nudes,

View of the exhibition "Suzanne Valadon," 2025, at the Centre Pompidou, Paris.



Casting the Net, 1914.

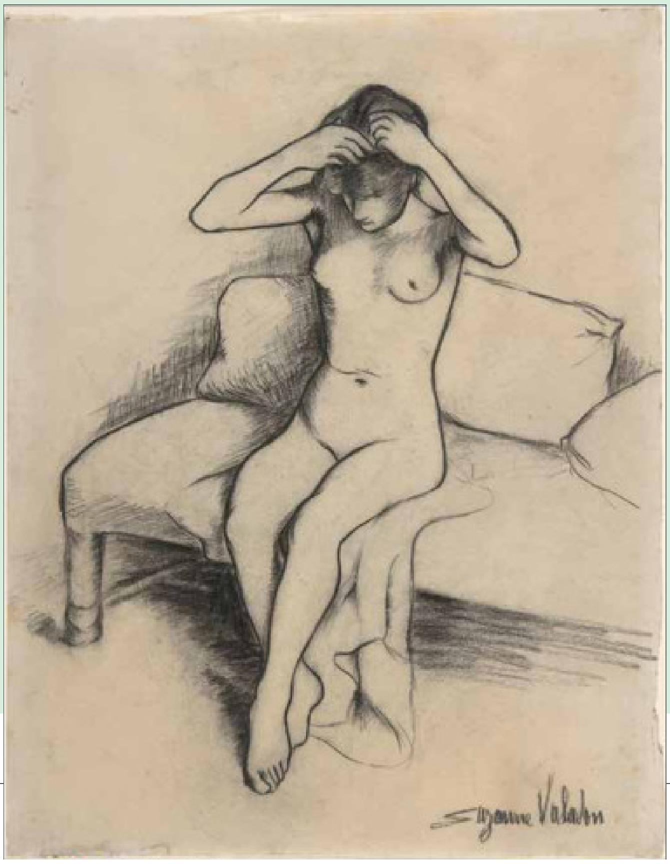
they are in dialogue with one of the most traditional forms of painting, harkening back to Jean Siméon Chardin's 17th-century compositions and Edouard Manet's 19th-century adaptations. Yet they are equally testaments to the fullness and freedom of Valadon's life.

The Violin Case (1923) is rich with pattern, texture, and color, and Valadon's large-scale painting of male nudes, *Casting the Net* (1914), forms its backdrop—those characteristically lean legs seeming to walk amid a table strewn with patterned textiles, ceramic vases, a jug of flowers, a well-worn book, and the violin of the title.

The inclusion of her own painting within another composition signals that these aren't neutral or even symbolic objects. They are aspects of Valadon's lived experience. Rendered unfussily, with the same unflinching gaze she brought to her models, the depicted things represent both the finest of art and the most quotidian of artifacts. They capture the world of Montmartre as one of sensory pleasure, a place where music, painting, and literature were available to everyone, even those born without privilege. Working between art and the everyday, Valadon opened up new possibilities for an art *of* the everyday—an idea of art we continue to benefit from in the present. ●

+ Model Citizens

Valadon began her artistic career by drawing (she claimed to have started sketching in earnest when she was 9), and the strong lines of her paintings can be traced to this foundational practice. Scenes such as the one in *Nude* (ca. 1895) offer especially intimate insight into her world and the working lives of Parisian models.



From top: Photo Hervé Véronèse; Photo Jacqueline Hyde/Courtesy Centre Pompidou, Paris; ©The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

SARAH OPPENHEIMER C-010106

A new publication from Landmarks, the public art program of The University of Texas at Austin

LANDMARKS

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and his paintings
will never
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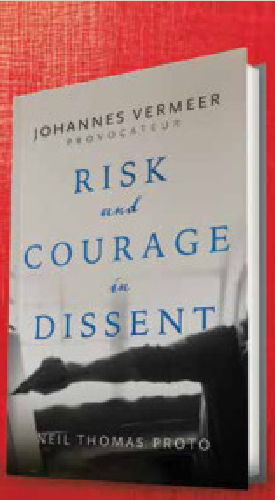
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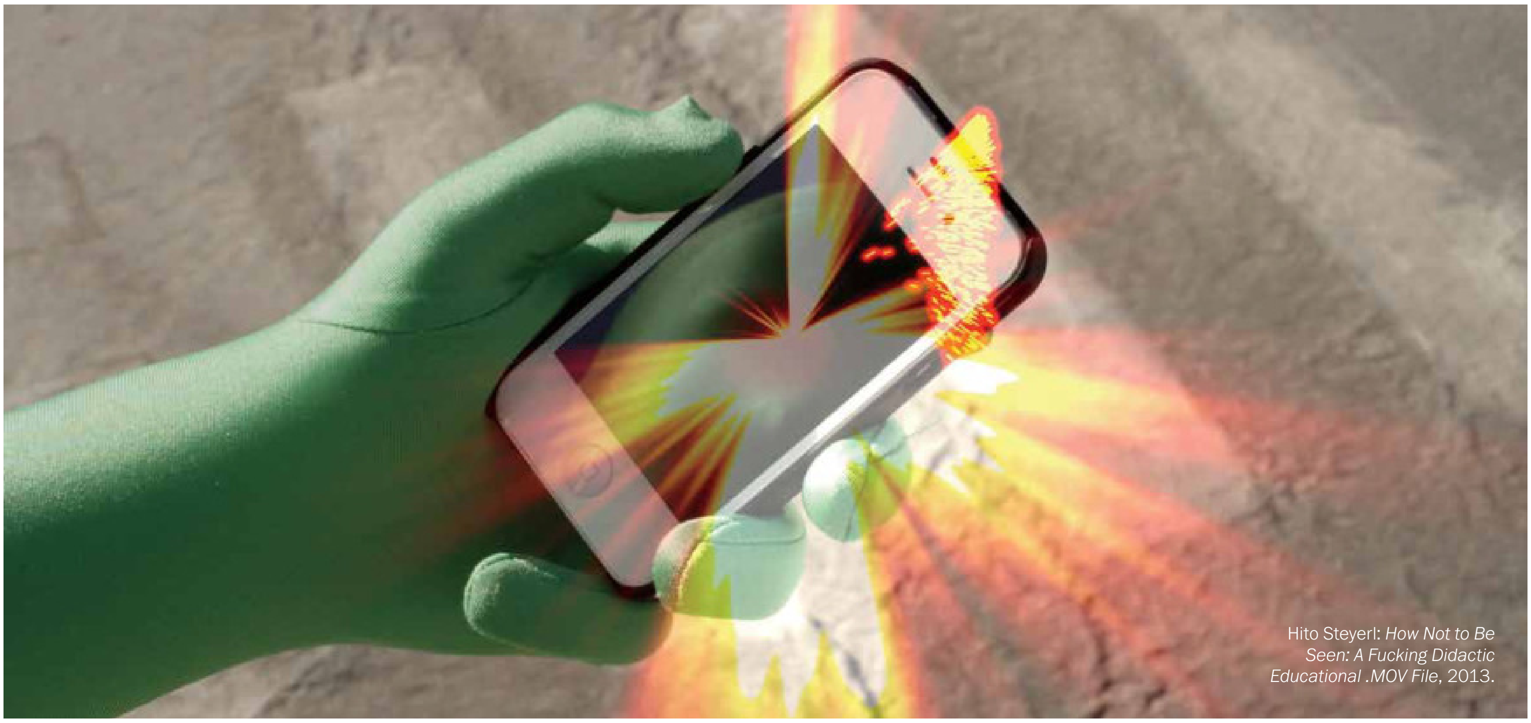
Heat Death

Hito Steyerl warns AI art and NFTs are “onboarding” the culture toward exploitation.

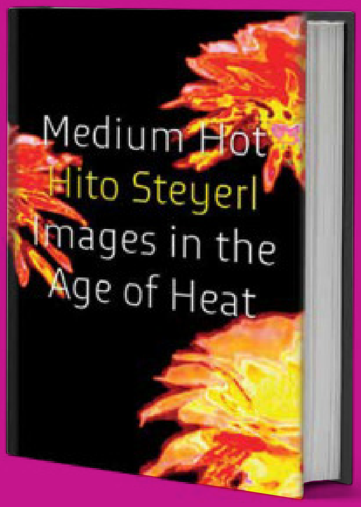
by Larissa Pham



Hito Steyerl: *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, 2013.

For more than a decade, artist Hito Steyerl has been writing—in biting, playful prose—about how images, technology, and politics are all interlinked. Her newest book on the subject, *Medium Hot: Images in the Age of Heat*, out from Verso, throws her consistent through lines into relief, and brings forward inconsistencies in her thinking too.

Steyerl’s first book, *The Wretched of the Screen* (2013), was perhaps her most rousing. “Free Fall,” a standout essay therein, interrogates the European construction of linear perspective as a means for “enabling Western dominance,” then pivots to the increasing ubiquity of aerial perspective—a militaristic, surveilling way of seeing that “projects delusions of stability, safety, and extreme mastery.” Another essay, “Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy,” urges artists to examine the exploitative politics of the art world itself, such as its reliance on under- or unpaid labor.

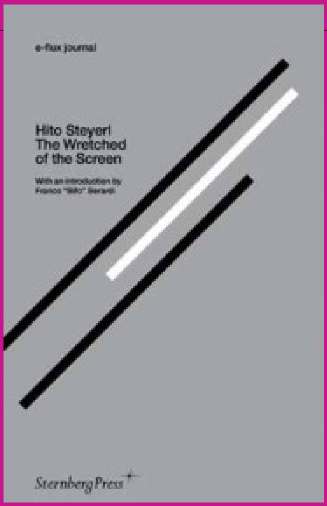


Medium Hot: Images in the Age of Heat, by Hito Steyerl, New York, Verso Books, 2025, 192 pages.

The artist takes to related topics in her visual work too, sometimes treating the material with an unnerving absurdity. *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013), one of her best-known works, navigates the question of invisibility in an increasingly surveilled world by satirizing the form of instructional video. Steyerl, the video’s protagonist, offers absurd suggestions for avoiding surveillance. Smearing chroma-key green makeup on her face, she “disappears” into the background; she also archly suggests being smaller than a pixel, being a woman over 50, and being a disappeared person as an enemy of the state. This jarring tonal contrast is emblematic of her work, the dissonance buffered by her focus on larger systems rather than specific scenarios.

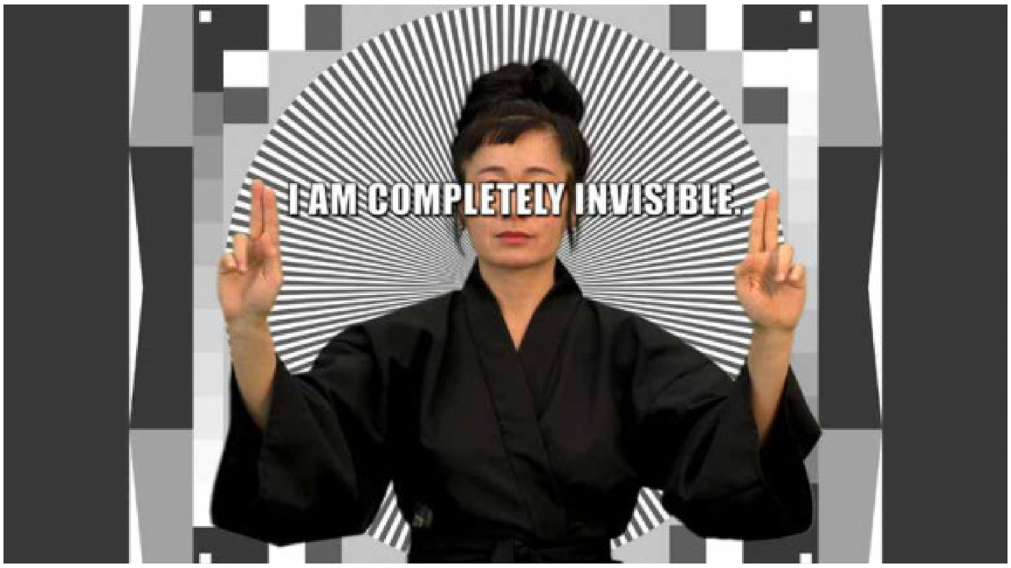
Steyerl’s second book, *Duty Free Art* (2017), continues her project of highlighting how capital, exploitation, and art are intertwined, though it takes on a broader constellation of phenomena, including romance scams, freeport art storage, and the rise of fascism. Yet where in *Wretched*, the reader felt the keen glare of Steyerl’s concentration, in some of *Duty Free Art*’s essays, it’s hard to tell what’s fact or fiction, or just how serious Steyerl is about it all: As her international fame has risen, Steyerl has presented herself alternately as

From top: Courtesy Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Esther Schipper, Berlin, Paris, and Seoul; Courtesy Verso Books, New York


e-flux journal
Hito Steyerl
The Wretched of the Screen
With an introduction by Franco "Bifo" Berardi
SternbergPress

Duty Free Art
Hito Steyerl
Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War

Top: *The Wretched of the Screen*, London, Sternberg Press, 2012, 200 pages. Above: *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*, New York, Verso Books, 2019, 256 pages.


I AM COMPLETELY INVISIBLE.

How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File, 2013.

Left, from top: Courtesy Sternberg Press, London; Courtesy Verso Books, New York; Right: Courtesy Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Esther Schipper, Berlin, Paris, and Seoul

gadfly, critic, oracle of surfaces, and politically engaged artist. The opening anecdote in her 2014 essay “Proxy Politics: Signal and Noise” – about smartphone cameras using algorithms and scans from a user’s camera roll to “create” images – sounds fantastically interesting, jaw-dropping if true. But Steyerl’s description of the technology proves far more fanciful than the paper she cites.

These fabulations, paired with Steyerl’s gliding, affectless authorial voice, contribute to a sense of disorientation. Nevertheless, Steyerl topped *ArtReview*’s 2017 Power List as the most influential person in the art world for her “political statement-making and formal experimentation.” Her best work merges these aspects: Any viewer of *How Not to Be Seen* will surely consider their vulnerability to surveillance, and feel the futility of escape. In a 2023 interview, journalist Philip Oltermann asked her if she “saw art as a way to point a finger at social injustices, to educate people?” Steyerl replied with a decisive no, saying “it would be pointless if art worked like that. If you want to make a difference with art, which is a motive I perceive as questionable, then the single most stupid approach would be to tell people off.”

In her latest book, Steyerl returns to her familiar territory of war and violent conflict, updated for the era of Web3, and this time she expresses her stance more decisively and simply than ever before. Steyerl herself has relied on AI before, using it to generate animations and graphics; her deep interest in – and intimate familiarity with – new technologies is part of what allows her to see their potential for exploitation. In *Medium Hot*, she comes down hard on the so-called promise of generative AI, cryptocurrency, and the AI-fueled accelerationist fantasies of Big Tech investors. It’s exciting to see Steyerl take such a definitive position; yet in doing so, the book exposes a core inconsistency of her practice, a puzzling political lacuna.

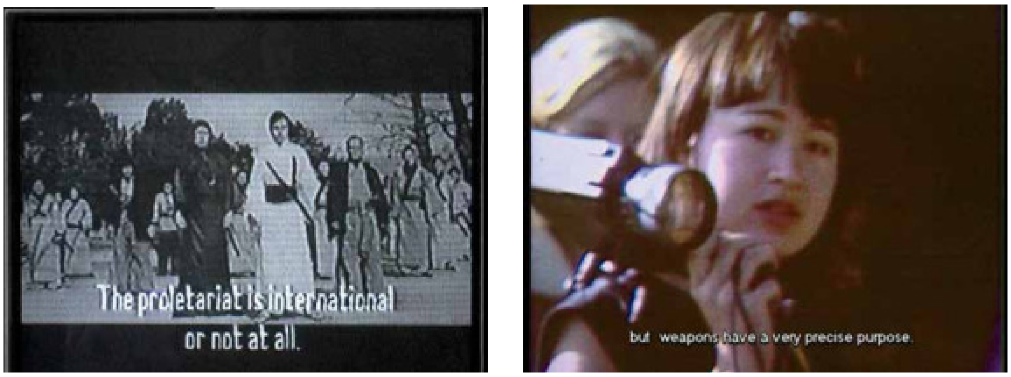
Steyerl’s primary critique is that the industry surrounding AI and Web3 uses enormous amounts of energy and is wildly exploitative not only of the environment, but of human “micro-workers,” remote laborers paid not in wages but in tiny gamified increments, dependent on completed tasks. Crypto mining has thrived on the edge of conflict zones – as it did in Kosovo until it was banned in 2022 – where political instability combined with formerly socialist infrastructure contributed to cheap energy that could immediately be put into mining. All this energy must come from somewhere: Earth itself pays the cost.

The cheap labor essential to “artificial intelligence” feeds on the exploitative conditions generated by political and economic instability. Steyerl highlights the example of Kurdish women workers in northern Iraq, who are hired to do ghost work tagging images for self-driving cars. Women often take these jobs because the work can be done from home; for some of them, home is a refugee camp where they have lived for 10 years. The irony, Steyerl points out, is that “self-driving cars were being trained by people who, in many cases, had difficulties accessing affordable transport anywhere – let alone enjoying freedom of movement across borders.”

These critiques aren’t necessarily new, but they are urgent; many opponents of AI – or rather, of its unrestricted and irresponsible use – have cited its exploitation of microworkers and its environmental harm. Steyerl makes a more novel, if subtler point when she describes how crypto art is responsible for “onboarding” people to Web3, its infrastructure “creating a new stage of financialization defined by massive waste of energy and an enormous carbon footprint.”

The NFT bubble has popped, of course. But many people have bought into this new technological environment, with crypto wallets and ChatGPT on their phones. The end result, Steyerl speculates, probably won’t be the singularity, but something much less interesting: newer and more invasive ways of getting ripped off by tech companies. For now, many AI services – Google search summaries, ChatGPT – are free. But what will happen when users become dependent on them? They’ll likely charge for subscriptions, scraping consumers’ data only to sell it back to them. All, of course, as the world burns.

The rapid rollout of various generative AI apps – like DALL-E, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, and Sora – has been accompanied by a hype cycle of publicity. Artists, of course, know that generative AI isn’t worth the hype:


The proletariat is international
or not at all.
but weapons have a very precise purpose.

Two stills from Steyerl's video *November*, 2004.

Courtesy Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Esther Schipper, Berlin, Paris, and Seoul (2)

The images these tools create are universally shitty slop, scraped together from previously existing internet detritus. Yet, Steyerl argues, the breathless publicity around generative AI and its so-called creative applications masks its true, and perhaps only, utility: as a tool of dominance and warfare. Autonomous weapons and AI-driven targeting have been part of the global war playbook since at least 2021, with both Ukraine and Gaza becoming, she writes, "laboratories for testing AI warfare, very often by Western arms makers looking for a robust and regulation-free R&D environment."

As in nearly all Steyerl's work, *Medium Hot* is concerned with what happens in conflict regions. The book cites interviews with Kurdish workers in refugee camps, as well as conversations with recent immigrants to Germany; she mentions both the wars happening in Gaza and Ukraine. Yet, for a writer so interested in the systemic causes of exploitation and suffering, she refrains here from expressing a stance on any given global conflict, an omission that creates a strange lacuna – a kind of weightlessness that destabilizes the text.

Calling wars and genocides "conflicts" – a word that appears 21 times in the book – makes it easier to talk about their roles in systems, but it also has an alienating effect. Shouldn't one care about the causes and conditions of those conflicts? They are not inexorable acts of machinery, their conclusions already forgone.

Perhaps Steyerl's avoidance of taking sides originates from a formative experience. Two decades ago, she made a short documentary titled *November* (2004) that features clips from a shoot-'em-up Western film Steyerl made with her close friend, Andrea Wolf, when they were both 17. Only the men, the bad guys, draw weapons in the film; the women fight with their bare hands. These clips of fake violence are juxtaposed against found footage: In the 1990s, Wolf went underground to join the Kurdish Worker's Party, or PKK. She was killed in 1998, possibly executed by the Turkish government. Wolf was made a martyr; *November* includes footage of protesters on the street carrying posters depicting her face.

The film, like the rest of Steyerl's work, avoids neat narrative, yet it is profoundly about disillusionment – with armed resistance, with the hero's righteous violence. The revolutionary desire that led Wolf to join the PKK ended with her lying dead on a dusty road, though according to the German government, she is not dead – but merely disappeared. Steyerl acknowledges Germany's support of the Turkish army; in her narration, she also notes that the PKK itself has committed violent crimes, including killing civilians. Clips show pro-Kurdish protests in Germany, one scene featuring a man declaring via microphone: "It is German tanks that are bulldozing Kurdish villages."

In 2019 Steyerl protested in solidarity with Kurdish liberation, staging a performance, *Women for Rojava*, with three other artists. She called for Germany to stop show-ing her work "as part of its external cultural diplomacy," continuing, "I am sick of my work being deployed to detract attention from the German state's tacit agreement with displacement, ethnic cleansing, and warfare, and to lend it an aura of tolerance and inclusivity." It's impossible not to draw parallels between then and now, as US-made and German arms rain down on Palestinian refugee camps.

> For a writer so interested in the systemic causes of exploitation and suffering, she refrains from expressing a stance on any given global conflict.

But Steyerl doesn't. Though she has consistently – if with some affective distance – positioned herself as a champion of class solidarity and of the oppressed and exploited, she spoke scathingly last spring of pro-Palestinian activists who have been critical of Israel, whom she accused of enlisting "art as social media performance." She has also critiqued the "English-language academic bubble" for, in her eyes, failing to fully comprehend Germany's history and its commitment to defend against what it perceives to be anti-Semitism. Is Steyerl's curious lacuna, as the deep ambivalence of *November* may indicate, a somewhat stifled call for nonviolence? Is it an act of self-preservation amid an increasingly bitter divide in the German art world? Or is it a stance of neutrality?

Neutrality, after all, pervades *Medium Hot*, which, as its title suggests, frequently returns to the imagery of heat. There's the effect of AI's energy use on the climate, with Steyerl's concern for the planet thrumming behind the text. It addresses as well the output of generative AI through temperature, describing how the process of statistical image rendering sees a clear image as "cool," while adding noise creates "heat." A new image is created by removing that noise, and therefore, Steyerl argues, these images have nothing at all to do with what is indexically "seen" by an eye, but rather what the AI model detects as hot and cold. In other words, these images are a "medium hot." According to the laws of thermodynamics, energy is only possible when there exist regions of both hot and cold. The heat death of the universe thus occurs when neutrality has been achieved – when all temperatures are the same: when zones cannot be differentiated.

Near the end of the book, Steyerl references Roko's Basilisk, a thought experiment from the early days of AI speculation. The question posed is: If you knew a superintelligent AI would eventually dominate the earth, would you support it now, or wait until you had no choice? But Steyerl knows the question is wrong, because it supposes too narrow, too dismal a future. "Maybe the thing that really exists in the future is not an autocratic, bullying basilisk but a commune or cooperative of red hackers who have finally realized a sustainable and fair economy," Steyerl writes. "One might be bullied and threatened … but if anyone tells you that you have no choice, then you should say no." If only she would. ●

Phyllis Chillingworth

Phyllis Chillingworth, *Chasing the Sunset, Montauk*, oil, 24″ x 32″

Phyllis Chillingworth
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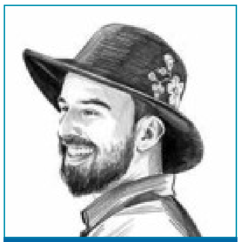
NEW TALENT

The editors of *Art in America* selected a global group of 20 exciting artists to watch. Read about all of them in the pages that follow.

Portrait illustrations by Joe McKendry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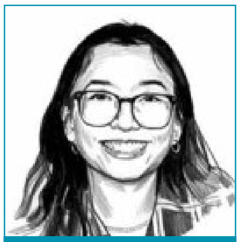
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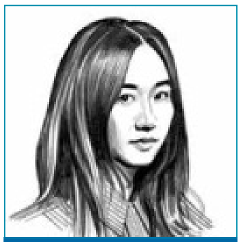
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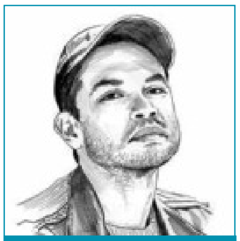
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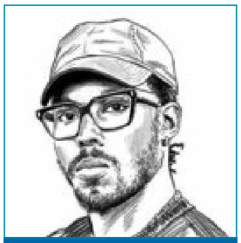
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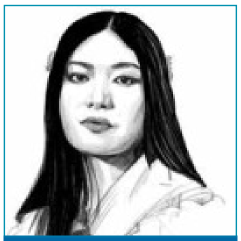
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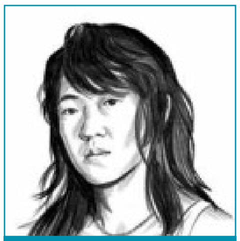
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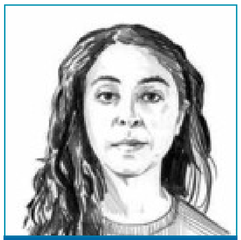
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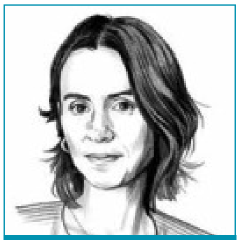
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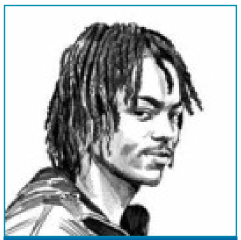
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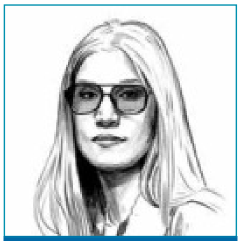
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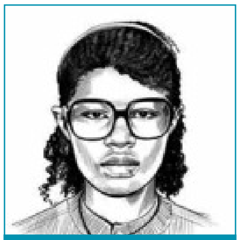
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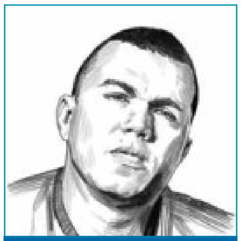
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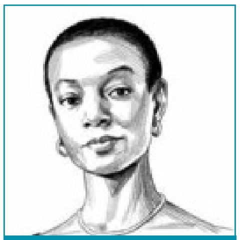
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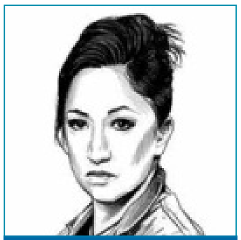
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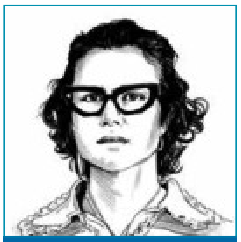
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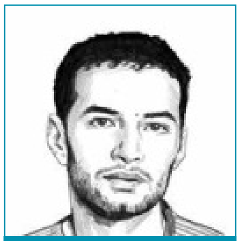
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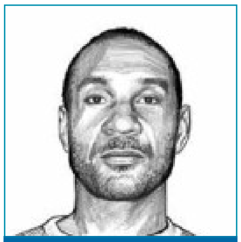
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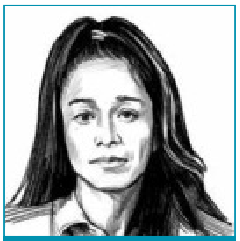
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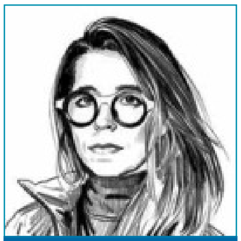
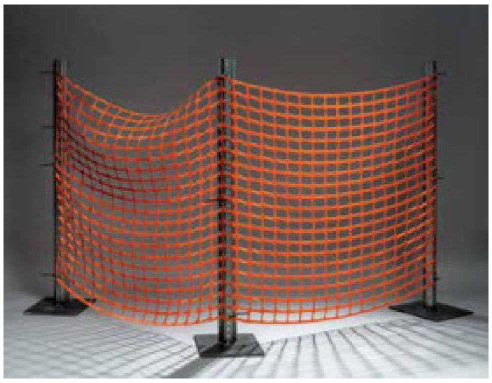
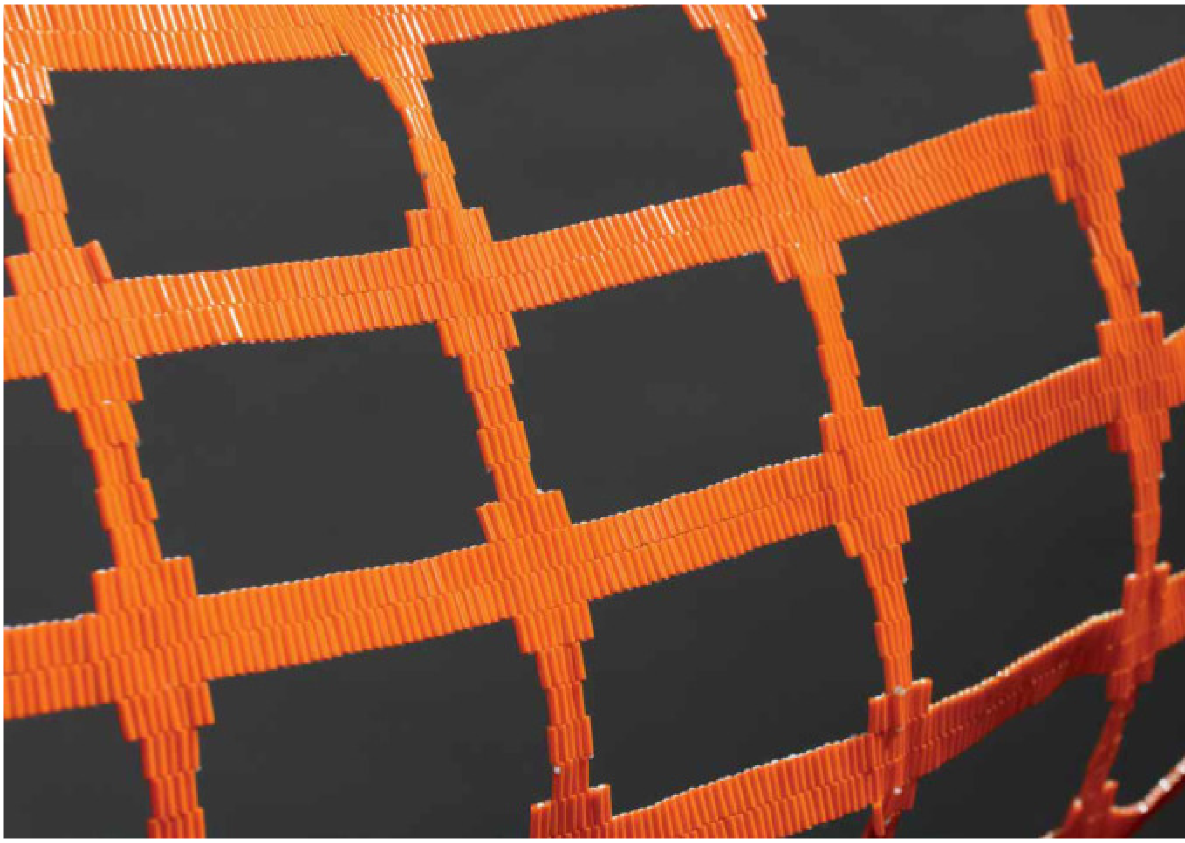

BRITTANY NELSON

NICO WILLIAMS

An Indigenous artist beads trash and treasures.





Below, Nico Williams: *Barrier,* 2023, and right, a detail of the sculpture.

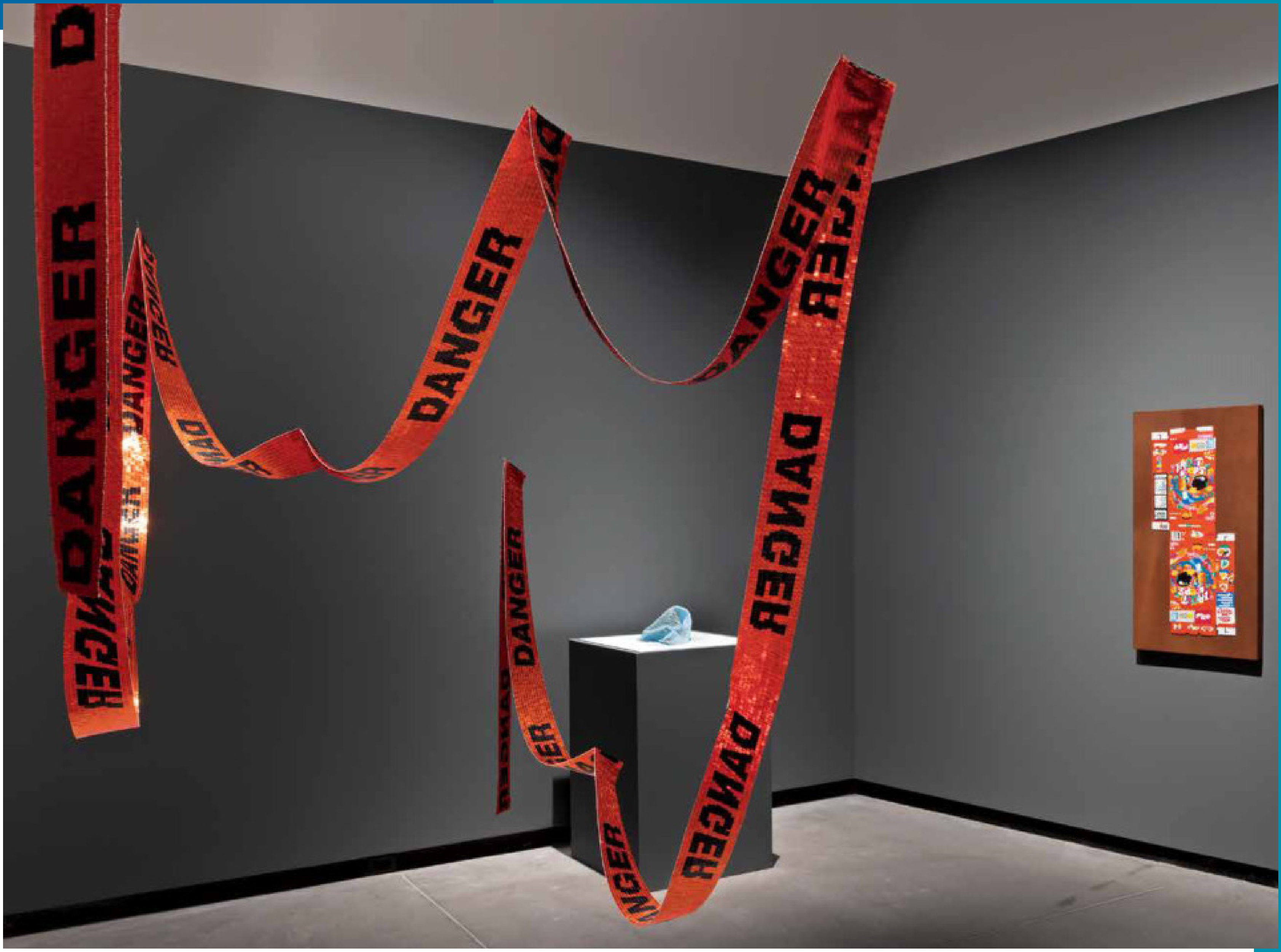
▶ **Nico Williams, a beadwork sculptor** and member of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation in Tiohtià:ke (the area now known as Montreal), transforms glass beads into a sort of velvety substance. His work, which he calls “soft sculpture,” references everything from bingo cards and dice to caution tape and plastic fencing – all in a manner that embeds beauty in the banal.

By re-creating common objects, Williams comments in a way on materiality and its role in separating Native activists from sacred sites transgressed by pipelines. He also explores how materials foster connection, from “rez aunties” making an extra buck at bingo halls to different kinds of cultural preservation. Williams balances barbs aimed at socioeconomic forces with humor intrinsic to the act of beading gambling cards and IKEA bags for display in museums he couldn’t afford to visit as a child – with the hope of inciting what he called “booming Native laughter that shakes windows down the street.”

First exposed to beading by elders on his reserve (as reservations are known in Canada), Williams didn’t take up the practice until after departing at age 16. But like many contemporary Indigenous artists, he found it difficult to access his culture in urban environments, leading him to YouTube videos for self-education. Later, as an apprentice to Algonquin artist Nadia Myre, he traded help rebooting a car for training in beadwork. In 2021, during studies for his MFA at Concordia University in Montreal, Williams began approaching his craft from a more technical mindset after accepting an invitation to join the Contemporary Geometric Beadwork research team, and he has taught workshops at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which he laughingly recalled mistaking for the Met and referred to as a “beading boot camp.” Of his work at MIT, he said, “I can’t do math – I just see.”

His experimental approach to beadwork is rooted in the principle of continuity. “We bead without knots,” he said. “The beads represent community – if you make a knot, that puts a knot in the community.” Early on, he explored his craft in small works

Photos Paul Litherland/Courtesy Blouin Division, Montreal and Toronto (2)



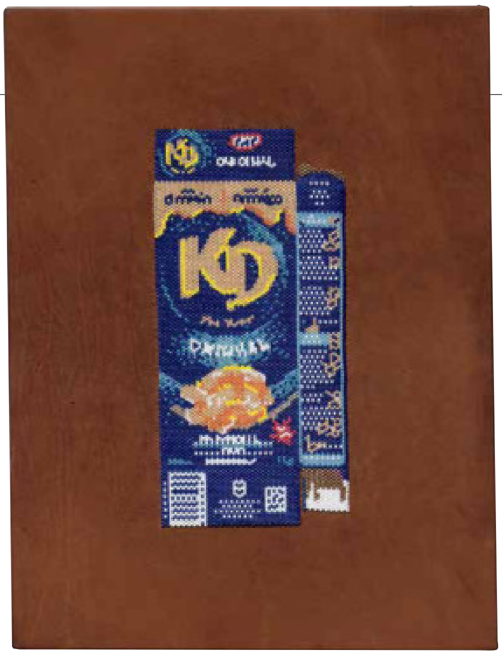
View of the exhibition “Biskaabiiyang | Returning to Ourselves,” 2023, showing *Danger! Tread Lightly*, 2023; *Bang On Man!!!*, 2022; and *Kellogg’s Loops*, 2021, at Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery, Sarnia, Ont.

like *Starlite Variety* (2021), a rendering of a shopping bag from a convenience store, and *KD* (2021), a yellow and blue beaded iteration of a Kraft Mac & Cheese box s titched into leather.

From these intimate consumerist effigies, Williams started making larger pieces mainly by accident after he intended to order 24 strands of orange beads but purchased 24 kilograms instead. That led to *Barrier* (2023), a large lattice of safety netting comprising orange bugle beads and three metal posts, and *Biskaabiiyang | Returning to Ourselves* (2023), a 73-foot-long hanging work fashioned like flaming caution tape. The pair of larger works evoke Inuit- and Métis-led “water protector” struggles in Canada around the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline and, for American viewers, the Oceti Sakowin–spearheaded Dakota Access Pipeline protests in 2016.

Such works earned Williams the $100,000 Sobey Art Award in 2024 and led to “Bingo,” a momentous solo show at Phi Foundation in Montreal (on view through September 14) containing more than 30 works grappling with land sovereignty, pecuniary difficulties, and trade in Indian Country. All the while, Williams continues to reckon with the dissonance between the stark reality of the reserve and the surreal privilege of consumer culture – an intersection he captures in his transformations of everyday objects.

– Petala Ironcloud



KD, 2021.

From top: Photo Toni Hafkenscheid; Photo Paul Litherland/Courtesy Blouin Division, Montreal and Toronto

JEN DELUNA

Blurred paintings,
with a bite.

With the swipe of a huge brush, Jen DeLuna blurs her paintings before they can dry, freezing the image in a hazy moment. She describes the effect: "It's like that feeling of memory fading, like something you can barely grasp." Indeed, the works have a powerful feeling of uneasiness about them. Based on vintage found photographs, their combination of movement and stillness is inherently painterly.

"I would consider myself, first and foremost, a portrait painter," she says, but DeLuna doesn't know the identity of any of the women she paints. Many of the photographs she has used lately are images of '70s pin-up girls, as in works like *Rallying Sigh* (2024). She zooms in on their faces or cropped parts of their bodies, removing them from any context but leaving the viewer with a strange sense of their commodified origins. "I like to be respectful to whoever this person is," she tells me, which is part of why she calls her works "portraits," despite their anonymity. Carefully painting someone's face is "like falling in love," she says, smiling at the cheesiness of her own remark.

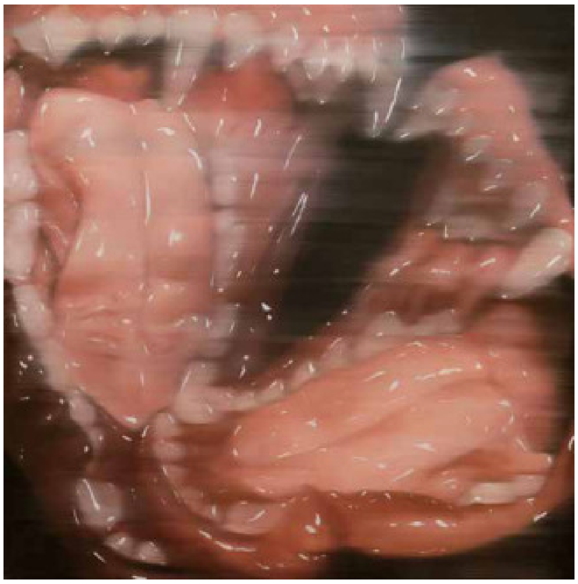
I visited DeLuna's studio while she was in residence at PLOP in East London. A massive painting of a slobbery, fanged, gaping dog's mouth greeted me as I walked in. "This is the largest painting I've worked on, ever," DeLuna told me. Going from a home studio in Boston to her own space for the first time has opened up new levels of scale. "I don't think I realized how limiting my space was."

The dog mouths are a new avenue for DeLuna. Like her portraits of women, they are blurred before highlights are added, giving a paradoxical finish that is both unstable and glossy. But the dogs are confrontational: They can be hard to look at for too long, their frozen ferocity leaping off the canvas. When I ask her about works like *Hounding* (2024), DeLuna talks about how dogs are associated with servitude and domesticity, but the underlying aggression of their animal nature never goes away. She always hangs them alongside her portraits of women. "There is a dialogue between them," she says, "without being too prescriptive or too explanatory."

DeLuna's practice is refreshingly formalist and intuitive. She justifies certain decisions by deciding simply whether she wants, or doesn't want, to do something. Others have called her work "glamorous" or "violent," comparing it to fashion photography, Gerhard Richter's work, and plenty more. She finds describing it herself much harder. "To imbue so much meaning into my work feels so decadent," she said. She had never seen Richter's blurred photo works, or painters with styles like hers, before developing her own practice as a BFA student at Carnegie Mellon University. Now, she says, all she sees online is work that looks like hers, because "that's how the algorithm works."

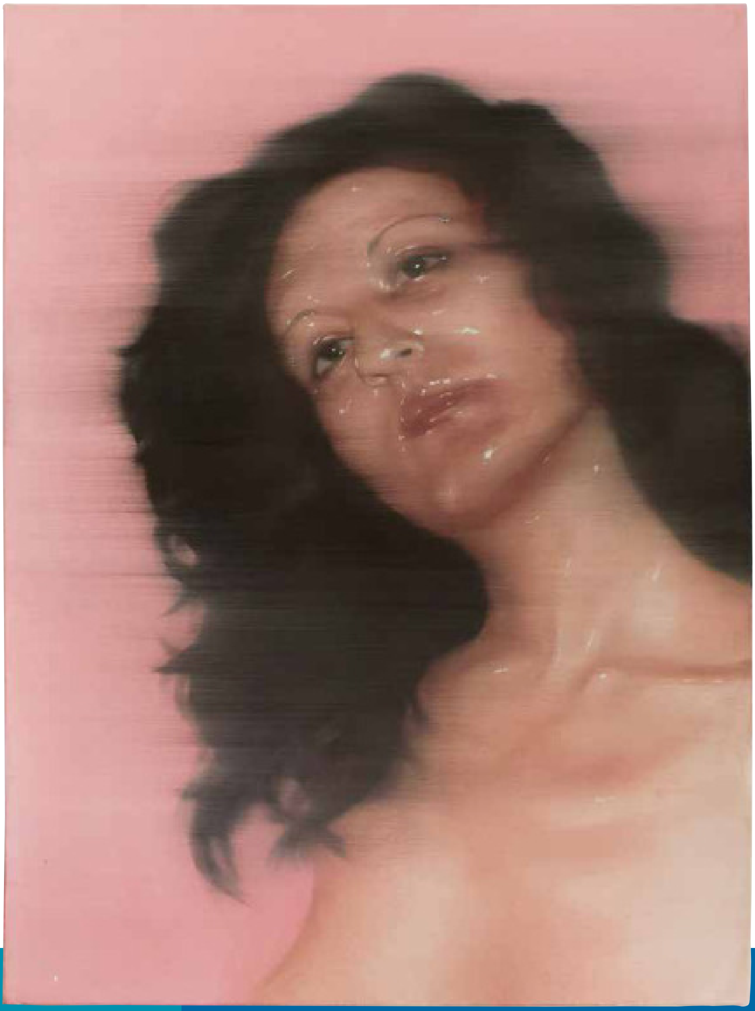
On their own, DeLuna's renderings of women and of dogs are striking: Her method of painting creates a magnetic final product that invites prolonged looking. But hung together, the works are staggering. They force us to confront the violence inherent in the way we look at women, a menagerie of eyes and mouths evoking carnality in jarringly different registers.

—Eliza Goodpasture

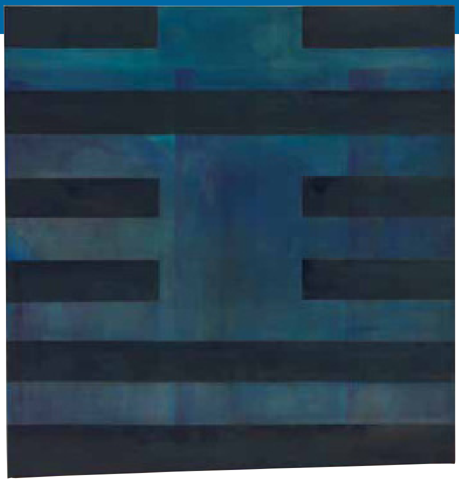


Jen DeLuna: *Hounding*, 2024.

Rallying Sigh, 2024.



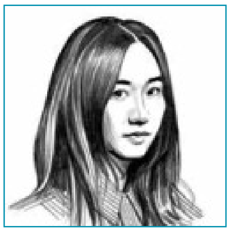
Courtesy Storage Gallery, New York (2)

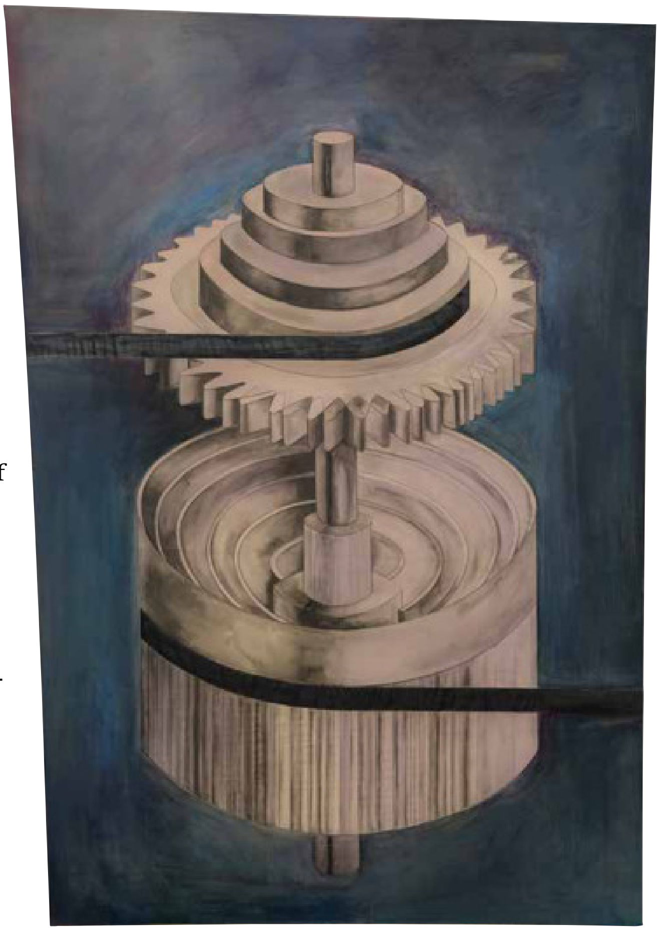


Leah Ke Yi Zheng: *no. 60*, 2024.

LEAH KE YI ZHENG

A Chicago-based artist dropped out of law school to paint.





Untitled (fusée in its flesh), 2023.

▶ **Leah Ke Yi Zheng never intended to be an artist.** Growing up in China, she studied with a traditional painter, who taught her calligraphy and how to copy the old masters. But when it came time to choose a career, she decided to become a judge. Although unfamiliar with United States history and the American legal code, she took her LSAT in Hong Kong and enrolled in law school in Indiana. Disenchanted, she dropped out during her sophomore year, and her mother urged her to pursue a business degree.

"I locked myself away for three days, smoking and drinking," Zheng said. "I told myself: 'Either I will die, or I'll make a choice I can commit to.'" She applied to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago shortly after.

That decision is paying off. In January, Zheng opened her second solo exhibition with Mendes Wood DM in New York, and she's preparing upcoming shows in Vienna and at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, where she now lives. On the day I visited the studio she shares with her partner on the city's industrial Near West Side, she was fussing with a small-scale model of the Vienna gallery, trying to envision the exhibition's flow. Marbles were piled on the floor, evidence of her young son. Almost everywhere I looked were artists' monographs and heavy reads by Barthes, Foucault, and Dostoyevsky.

While law and art may seem incompatible, the impulses behind both coalesce in Zheng's works, in which rational, even schematic, compositions coexist with more instinctive gestures. *Untitled (fusée in its flesh)*, a 2023 painting made as part of a series of machine works begun three years earlier, sets disembodied cylinders and gears against an abstracted backdrop, bisected by bands of color that might be mechanical themselves. Many of the machines Zheng depicts are fusees – the pulleys in antique watches and clocks – while others are fictional devices of obscure purpose. In *No.45* (2024), from another major series inspired by the 64 hexagrams of the *I Ching*, horizontal bars form visual interludes that are at once exacting and ineffable.

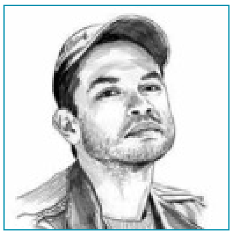
"Life is so full of data and information today," Zheng said. "The spiritual capacity I explore interrupts that data-and-information loop." One technique for interrupting the loop is to confound viewers about the very nature of painting. Zheng uses Chinese silks instead of canvases, attached to custom stretchers made of mahogany, cherry, and other varieties of wood. Nearly all her paintings are irregularly shaped. She describes her works as "uncanny things" that pervert our notion of a painting's two-dimensionality. The transparency of silk makes front and back, surface and depth simultaneous in Zheng's work, especially when hung in front of a light source, which lends the paintings a diffuse iridescence that can mimic watercolor.

"Traditional Chinese painting was a dead end," Zheng said. "My work seeks to reinvent or edit it," partly by combining ancient materials with the formal provocations of the Western avant-garde.

Risk – conceptual and physical – underpins her approach. Silk is an unforgiving medium, any accident turning permanent. But Zheng is unflustered. "There are no mistakes," she said. "Every mark is truthful. Every mark is authentic."

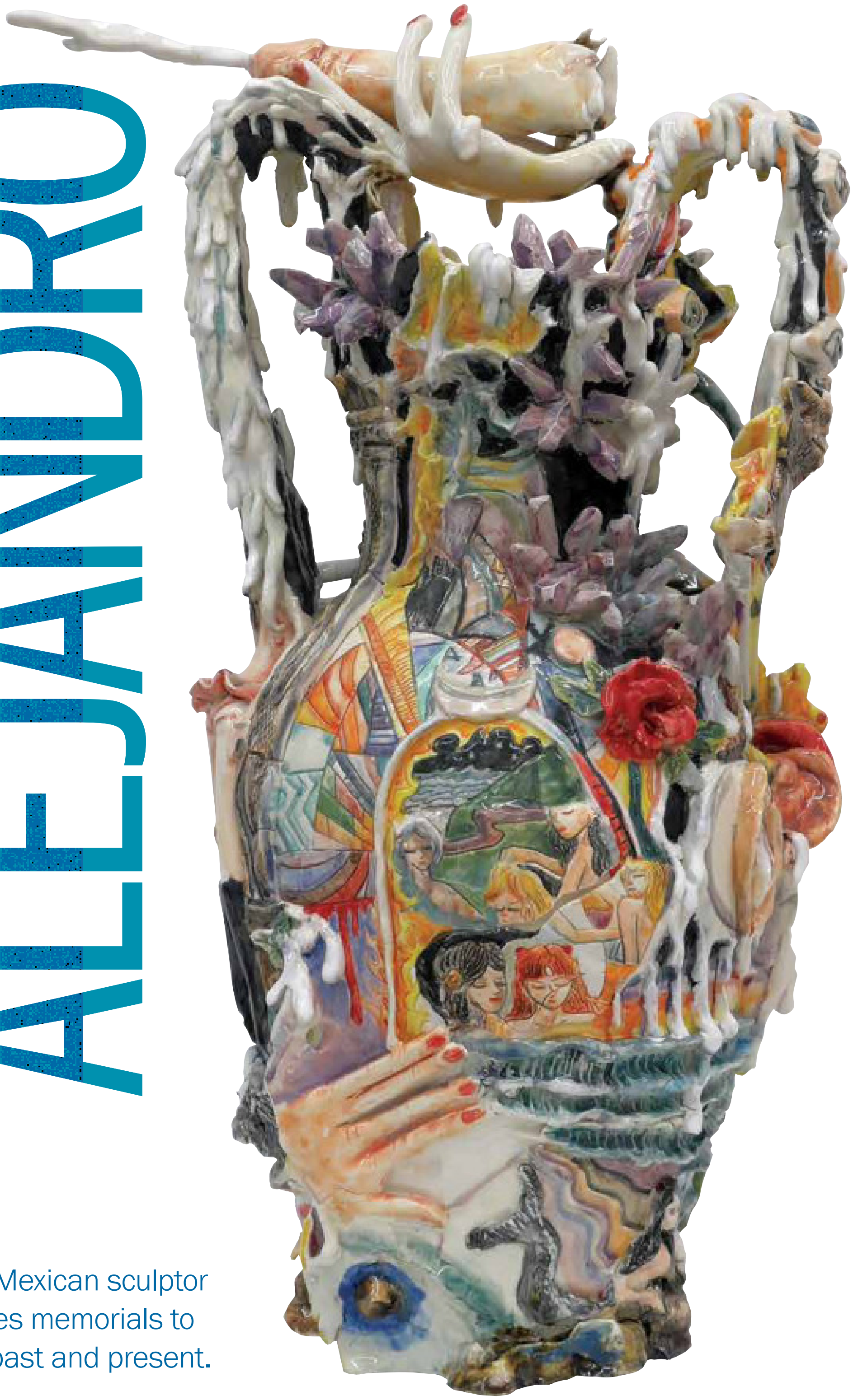
– Jeremy Lybarger

From left: Courtesy Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, Brussels, Paris, and New York (2); Right: Photo Guanyu Xu



ALEJANDRO GARCÍA

The Mexican sculptor makes memorials to the past and present.



Alejandro García Contreras: *The way you touched me*, 2023.

It had been a few weeks since Alejandro García Contreras had returned to Mexico after his first institutional exhibition in the United States, and dust had collected in his studio in Guadalajara. “I was making my own tomb – this was my funeral, my testament,” he said about his recent show at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn. Affected by the all-surrounding high-rises of New York, Contreras had turned the former industrial facility into a burial site, where ceramic totems made of different figures, faces, and fictional characters were stacked up within mounds of sand. The exhibition, titled “*¿Quién no ha intentado convertir una piedra en un recuerdo?*” [Who hasn’t tried to turn a stone into a memory?], evoked the human longing for material permanency by way of matter turning into dust – and dust turning back into matter again.

Within a framework of concrete casts that brought to mind pre-Columbian architecture, a portal opened into a bank of memories recorded via video on a cellphone. The ubiquitous device has dictated the vertical orientation we favor to share our stories with others, but Contreras correlates the cellphone with black mirrors used by the Aztecs, who peered into polished obsidian-glass in rituals of divination. “I realized it was a door to another dimension,” he said. Other funerary relics such as containers, pipes, and plates surrounded a resting ceramic skeleton, aiding its way into the afterlife.

Ceramics have always been at the center of Contreras’s production. From small trinkets to freestanding sculptures, he takes particular interest in vases. Aside from their use as tools for survival, carrying and storing food, vases have served across cultures as mediums for storytelling, representations of different times in civilization, and myths passed on through generations. In contrast to other formats, they allow a circular reading of their depictions, with no clear beginning or end – and thus the possibility for these fragile remnants of fallen empires to be understood as premonitions of our own decline.

Contreras’s ornate color-filled glazed compositions conjure a world on fire, full of melting objects and lovemaking scenes as well as nostalgic allusions to pop culture. *Star Wars* and Spiderman work as metaphors for the hero’s journey. Strong female figures from *ThunderCats* and the Japanese manga series *Sailor*

This page: Photo Olympia Shannon/Courtesy Pioneer Works, New York; Opposite: Courtesy Alejandro García Contreras

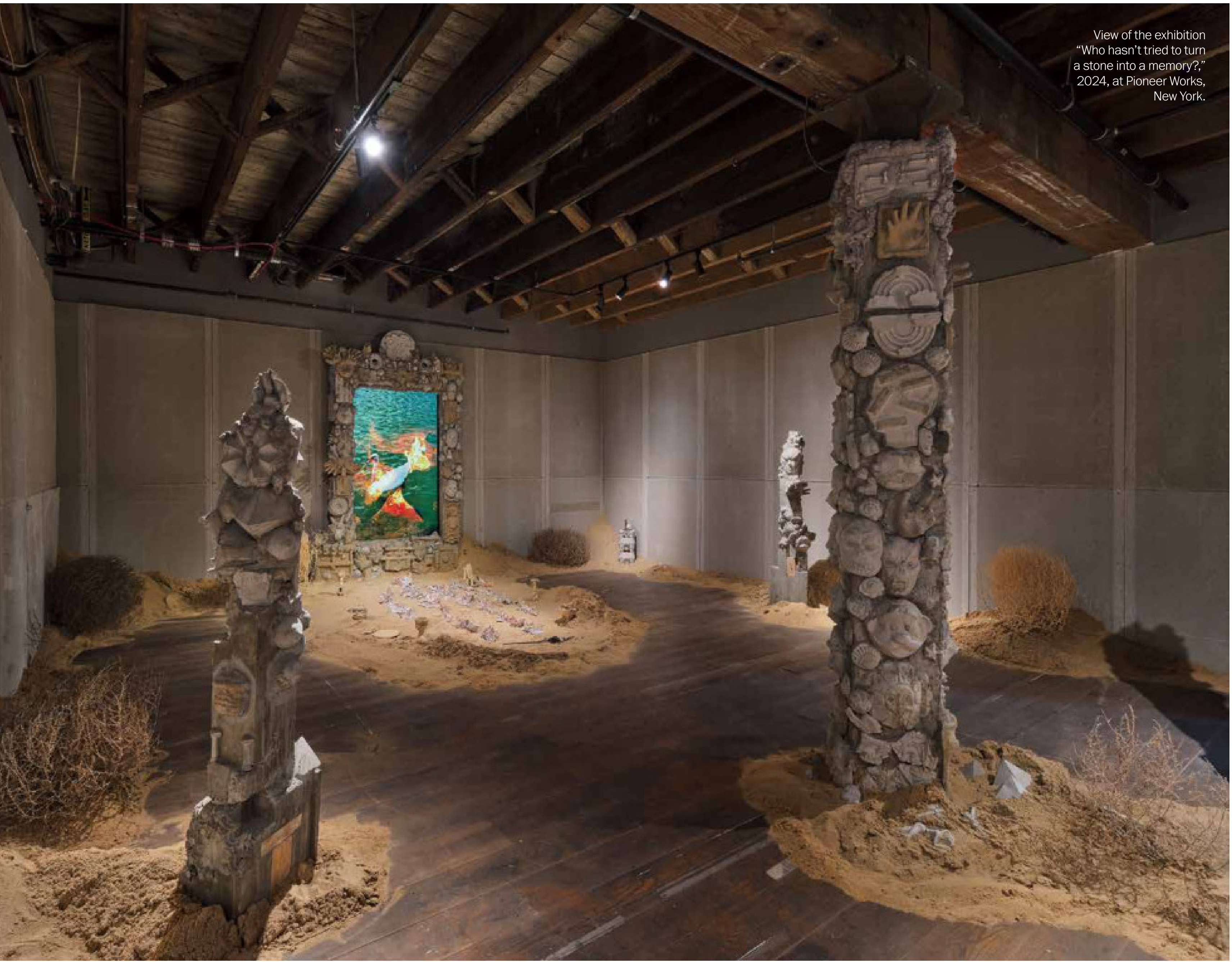
CONTRERAS

Moon stem from the artist's erotic awakening, and the recognition of these women as archetypes of goddesses capable of both creation and destruction.

Thinking back over the origins of his imagery, Contreras cited a story about how, when he was growing up in the southern state of Chiapas, his parents opened the door to some Jehovah's Witnesses. The apocalyptic illustrations in the materials they showed, and the notion that a god would destroy the world made a great impact, and evolved into a curiosity about religions such as Yoruba and Satanism.

His current work channels the collective unconscious of our syncretic times, the illusion of permanence of the edifices we've built and the forgetting of what was there before them. "Rationality took us nowhere," Contreras declared toward the end of our conversation. His creations instead propose a world where chaos and unpredictability are not seen as foes – and nature and desire take the reins.

– *Fabiola Talavera*



View of the exhibition "Who hasn't tried to turn a stone into a memory?," 2024, at Pioneer Works, New York.

BROOKLIN A. SOUMAHORO

An LA painter merges Op art with African patterns.

As Brooklin A. Soumahoro made his way through his industrial-style studio in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Glassell Park, he pointed out oil paintings in various stages of completion, and compared the act of creating them to another personal passion: cycling. “It’s about laying one brushstroke at a time, building the composition with the same patience it takes to climb a mountain – one pedal-stroke at a time,” he said, drawing parallels between two feats of endurance. Soumahoro’s discipline and fervor shine through his paintings, conveying optimistic energy by balancing methodical compositions with an intuitive sense of how colors work.

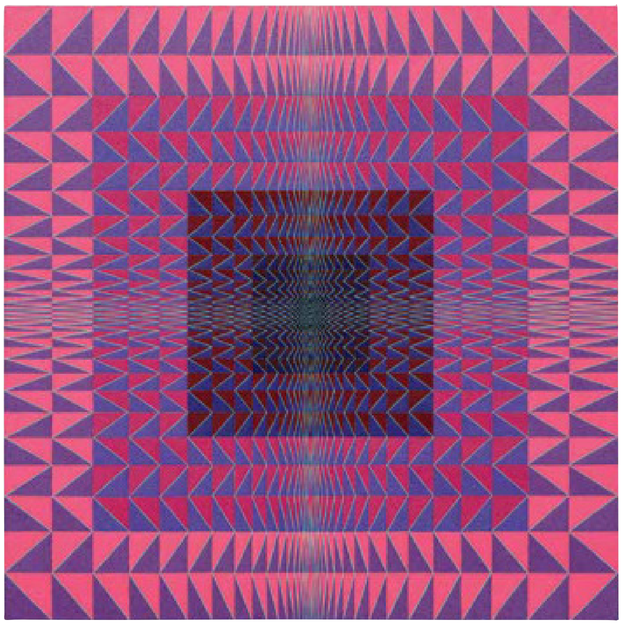
Born in Paris and based in LA since 2019, Soumahoro is a self-taught painter who approaches color theory as a matter of both feeling and science. His paintings’ brilliant palettes and dynamic patterns – inspired in part by West African textile designs – transform his canvases into portals, inviting viewers to dive within. “Choosing color is emotional and intuitive, while researching patterns is very cerebral,” the artist explained as he pulled several white binders off a shelf. He flipped through pages of notes detailing specific formulas for each painting’s color scheme. To show how he thinks about the subject, he pulled out a piece of paper and drew an X-and-Y grid with a sloped line running up the middle, demonstrating how incrementally increasing each shade’s degree of saturation creates a seamless gradient. At that moment, the studio seemed to turn into a sort of lab, with Soumahoro channeling data that explained why some colors stand still and others vibrate in different contexts.

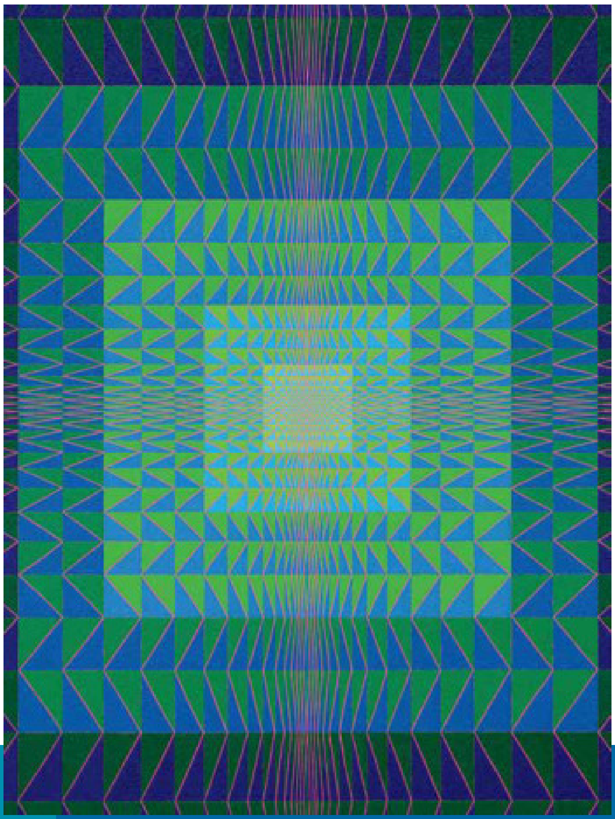
Striking a balance between left brain and right, between logic and emotion, comes naturally to Soumahoro, whose paintings exhibit machinelike precision while showcasing textured brushstrokes that reveal the artist’s hand. In addition to scientific qualities, his mind turns toward synesthesia, allowing him to equate musical rhythms with colors and patterns. Taking on the role of conductor, he studies rhythmic patterns by listening to albums on repeat – “searching for vibrations, frequencies, and cadences,” he said – that inspire the arrangements that carry the colors in his paintings. “The pattern is the rhythm,” he explained, “and colors are the musical notes.” Also instrumental are thoughtfully planned underpaintings of vibrant pigments like neon chartreuse and blazing magenta that create foundations for lively shapes to dance upon while peeking through slight cracks that emerge.

Soumahoro’s most recent body of work, first presented in his solo exhibition “The Open Window” at François Ghebaly gallery in LA last year, was inspired by his travels to the south of France, where he encountered sights reminiscent of those that inspired Henri Matisse. Saturated pigments of fuchsia and burgundy in *Window, Pnk/Prl.1.24* (2024) complement the steel blue and seafoam hues of *Window, Ble/Grn.1.24* (2024), evoking the Fauvist palette of Matisse’s *Open Window, Collioure* (1905). This painting became an essential touchpoint for Soumahoro, for its significance in the history of Modernism, and its sun-drenched Mediterranean hues and symbolic form, which Matisse revisited in the more pensive iteration *French Window at Collioure* (1914), made at the start of the Great War. Soumahoro said he enjoys engaging with art history to pay homage to oil painting’s expansive provenance. “Keep an open mind to yesterday,” he said, “to understand today.”

– Sigourney Schultz

Brooklin A. Soumahoro: *Window, Pnk/Prl.1.24*, 2024 (left), and *Window, Ble/Grn.1.24*, 2024 (right).

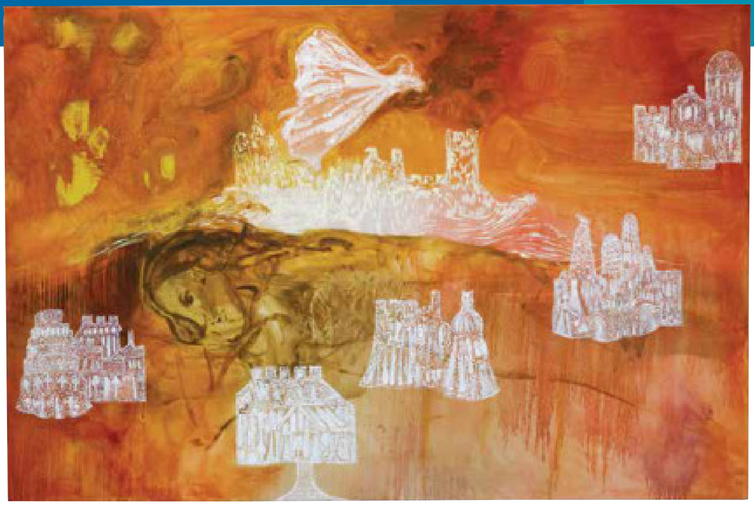




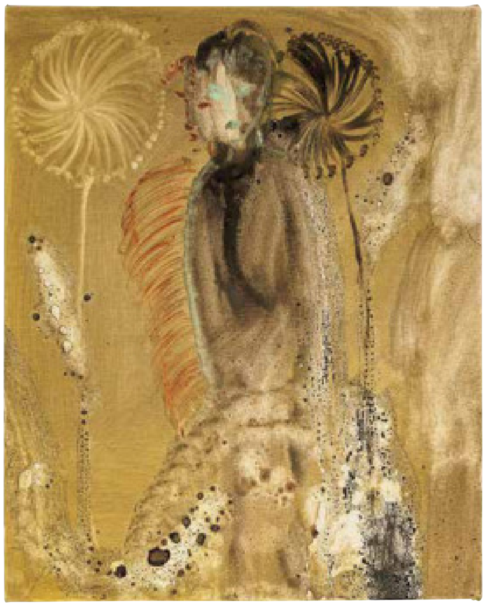
Courtesy François Ghebaly, New York and Los Angeles (2)

FAYE WEI WEI

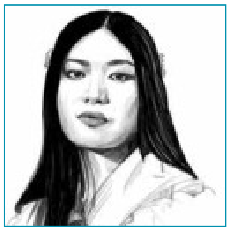
An artist finds musicality in paint.



Faye Wei Wei: *A Telescope Made of Champagne Glass*, 2024.



Untitled, 2024.



▶ **Faye Wei Wei's ethereal figurative paintings made a splash as** early as 2016, when she graduated from the Slade School of Fine Art in London. Especially on Instagram, her self-image and romantic visions – full of motifs of hearts, lovers, flowers, bows, and rosaries – introduced a sort of fantasy painter unburdened by fear of external judgment.

Ready for a change after notable shows at Situations in New York and Galerie Kandlhofer in Vienna, Wei Wei enrolled last year in the MFA program at Yale. During a recent visit to her studio in New Haven, Connecticut, the floor was covered with book pages and image references, along with a pair of halved baseballs with fluffy guts, a clay model of an imagined city, a doll's bed, and other found objects and sources of inspiration. "They are not necessarily any messes or obstacles – they are there for me to walk through," she said of the disarray that doubled as a portal for improvisation and transformation.

In one of her recent paintings, *Calcium Stars (severed romanesque ears)*, from 2024, streams of confetti exude from three floating ears above a figure reclining mischievously, undressed and in an ambiguous state between ecstasy and dread. The ears are loose studies of Romanesque sculptures that, in Wei Wei's poetic imagination, serve as an invitation for whispered secrets. "I love architectural creatures, forms that exist as spaces rather than just objects," she said, adding that the ears also reference a scene in Wong Kar-Wai's film *In the Mood for Love* (2000). "There's this idea [in the movie] of digging a hole in a tree and whispering secrets into it. I love the motif of hidden messages through storytelling."

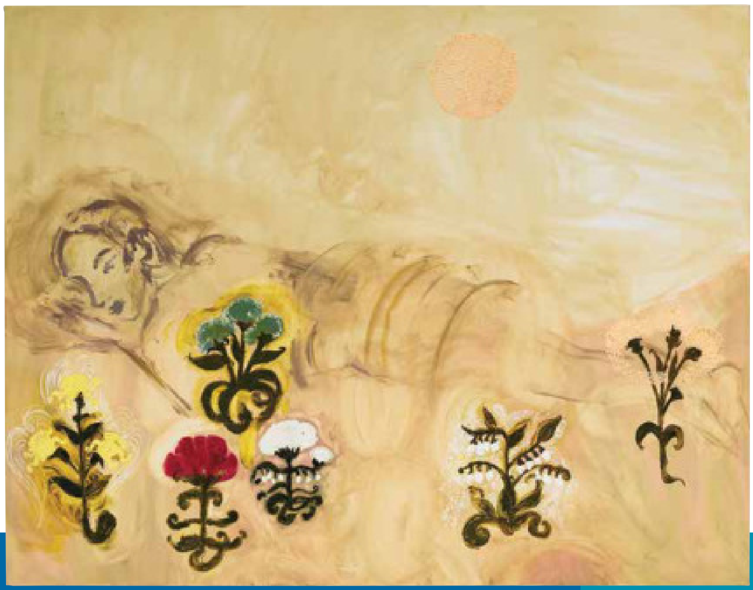
A Telescope Made of Champagne Glass (2024) features a resting figure surrounded by miniature architectural forms made to look like lace floating against a vibrant orange plane. "I was experimenting with texture in this piece, using a sponge," Wei Wei said. "I think of paint almost like a substance with its own value, like music. It carries deep emotion."

Expressive brushwork filled with musical energy – lively staccato notes, flowing legato melodies – sweep across many of her paintings. "In music, you have structure, like a sequence or a movement, and I think painting can mirror that," she said. In *A Theatre on the Moon* (2024), long, fluid strokes cloud the bell of a trumpet that turns into a sort of tempest, as if excavating the interior space of the instrument while activating its sonic charge on the canvas.

Looking at Wei Wei's work, one can feel both bewildered and beholden. It envelops you at once in the viewpoint of a performer on an instrument as well as that of an audience member peering at the same performance on stage. In that way, her style evokes a multiverse where painterly gestures, like music, play on emotions that can range from stoic to melodramatic, whimsical to melancholic, and slightly antiquated to refreshingly modern.

– Hindley Wang

Untitled, 2024.



From top: Courtesy Faye Wei Wei; Photo Manuel Carreon Lopez/Courtesy Galerie Kandlhofer, Vienna (2)

RACHEL YOUN

A sculptor brings fake flowers to life.

Rachel Youn's kinetic sculptures gyrate and writhe, their mechanized motions as artificial as the fake flowers and plants channeling them. Sourcing portable machines like massagers and automated baby rockers from Facebook Marketplace and other online listings, Youn attaches synthetic flora to the finds and rewires the devices' motors to bypass their automatic shutoff features. Working overtime, the impish sculptures labor repetitively like Sisyphus, turning off only when the gallery in which they are exhibited closes.

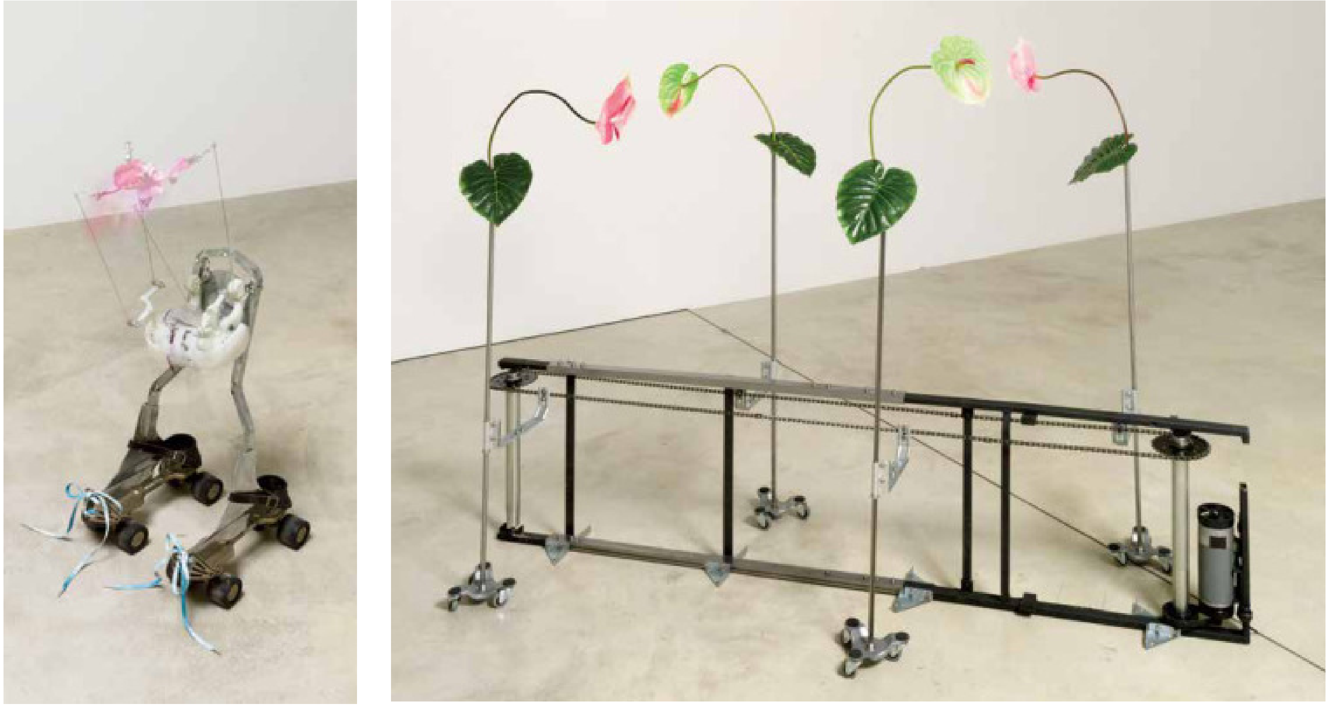
Growing up in a Baptist family in Missouri and New Mexico, the Korean-American artist began developing their practice at Washington University in St. Louis and then enrolled for a master's at Yale University in 2022. Key to Youn's work is the way failure and disappointment inhere in devices that promise self-soothing convenience and – in the case of massagers and baby swings – shortcuts to intimacy. Youn acquires these devices not knowing how close they are to their mechanical death, and attempts to lengthen their lifespan by replacing their motors. But the gears grind down eventually, as is inevitable for products manufactured cheaply and quickly, with the objects themselves seeming to ask: How do things literally and figuratively come apart after "going through the motions"?

Plus ça change (2024), a work in Youn's solo show at Soy Capitán in Berlin last year, features flowers on lanky stems fitted with rollers moseying bathetically around a frame deconstructed from a flat treadmill intended for use under a standing desk. The flowers jerk quickly around the corners, occasionally bumping into and nuzzling one another. A product that epitomizes multitasking self-optimization – a treadmill to be used while working – sheds its aspirational ethos and is turned on its side into an otiose waltz of flowers that nullifies the machine's intended redemptive use. Other works in the show were more erotically suggestive. Take *Rend* (2024), a shoulder massager affixed to a bicycle backrest set on roller skates. It rhythmically folds in and then stretches out a yonic pink orchid, adding an element of desire to movements that recall medieval torture racks.

Youn's studio is a rollicking farrago of objects, as if a bloodlessly corporatized brainstorming "mood board" has come to life with a vengeance. About their favored fake flowers spilling out of cardboard boxes, the artist said the plastic and other materials involved lend their works resilience that allows them to be "thrashed over and over" and to keep "performing perfection forever." Considering potential reactions to such work in a solo show at G Gallery in Seoul (on view through May 31), Youn remarked, "I'm curious how the idea of automation will translate. How will audiences in a different culture understand the desire to always work and to treat the body like a machine?"

For those of us closer to home, the endless repetitive work of Youn's sculptures prompts a question: Is there anything to be gained or exalted from all this labor? Or, when not driven by a higher purpose, does remaining in motion become an end in itself?

– Emily Chun



Rachel Youn: *Rend*, 2024 (left), and *The more things change*, 2024 (right).

Photo Roman März/Courtesy Soy Capitán, Berlin (2)

BINT MBAREH

A sound artist tunes into Palestinian resistance.

“Metaphors are necessary for change,” said Bint Mbareh, who animates her work with the metaphor of waves: waves of water, waves of sound. She grew up in Ramallah, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, and her sound art and installations engage layered meanings of water for Palestinians, as a material that is both violent and sacred.

As a student at Goldsmiths in London, Bint Mbareh (a stage name, assumed when the artist first started making sound work around 2019) studied Palestinian rain-summoning songs. They weren’t songs she knew, because they are very geographically specific and, as is the case for so many Palestinians, displacement figures on both sides of her family. “What that meant for me was that I would never sing with a grandmother in an organic way, the way that music is passed down,” she explained.

Bint Mbareh took up the challenge of learning the songs herself, but she doesn’t sing them as they were sung in the past. In works like *Time Flows in All Directions: Water Flows Through Me,* first performed in 2020, she twists and destabilizes them, using digital technology while singing live to loop, layer, and remix the sounds of her voice and different instruments. The instability prevents listeners from getting too comfortable, paralleling the tumult of Palestine’s own environment.

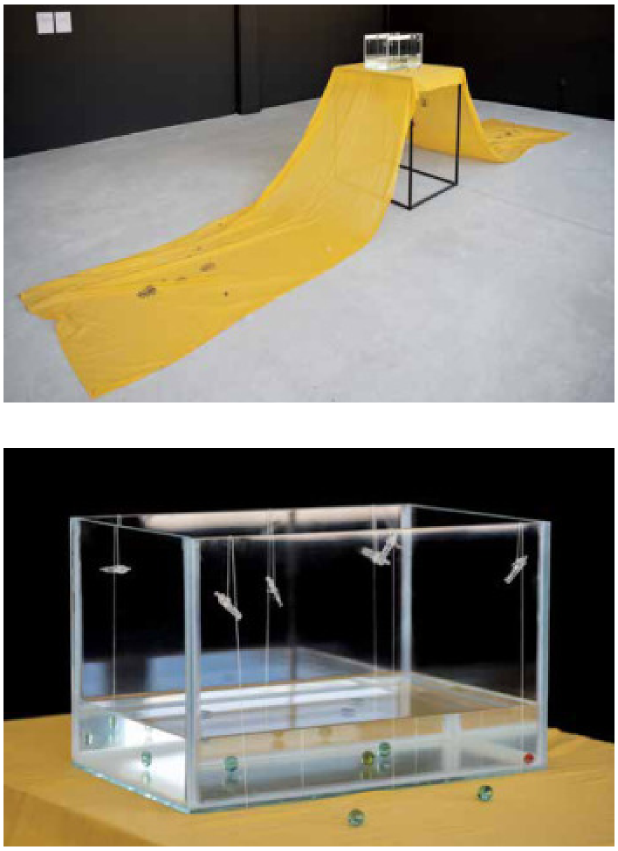
From her home base in London, Bint Mbareh started using the medium of what she conceptually calls a “choir” – a gathering of peers, collaborators, and friends who give collective voice to their grief in the aftermath of October 7, 2023. “It’s a medium that’s literally breaking the borders between our bodies,” she said. Last summer, she was invited to perform with one iteration of her choir at an Artists for Aid benefit concert in London organized by the musician Mustafa the Poet, along with Clairo, FKA twigs, and Blood Orange. She presented another choir-based interactive performance at Tate Modern last fall as part of a conference titled “Waterways: Arteries, rhythms and kinship.”

Since October 7, her work has taken on more physical forms beyond the realm of performance. Installation works like *Bodies of Knowledge* (shown last year at the Royal College of Art) and *What’s Left?* (in this year’s Sharjah Biennial) incorporate sounds as well as water in tanks that vibrate from the sound. In *What’s Left?*, Bint Mbareh added a tiny toy car and marbles to the tanks, evoking an eerie sense of childhood.

Despite her subject matter, there’s often an almost jarring element of humor and lightness in her work. “I feel like it is a huge privilege to be able to make art that is political,” she said, “but so much needs to be made fun of.” As for her name, “bint mbareh” is “something your mother-in-law would say to you,” she explained, with a laugh. “It means like when you say someone was ‘born yesterday.’”

With her complex blend of levity and depth, Bint Mbareh holds humor in one hand and the high stakes of survival in the other – all to explore what she calls “the most literal ways that sound can be resistance.”

– *Eliza Goodpasture*



Two views of Bint Mbareh’s installation *What’s Left?*, 2025, in the Sharjah Biennial.

Bint Mbareh performing at the 2024 Artists for Aid event in London.

From top: Photos Motaz Mawid (2); Photo Alfi Moss-White

MAURA BREWER

Money-laundering as institutional critique.

As an artist and academic, I've spent a lot of time considering what the point of making art is, and arguing with friends and colleagues about it. All the common refrains in this debate – that art is about beauty, cultural visibility, etc. – ring hollow against the overwhelming fact central to Maura Brewer's practice: that art is, perhaps more than anything else, a tool for money laundering.

Brewer, who is based in Los Angeles, works primarily in video, creating essayistic compositions out of public records, found footage, text messages, drawings, and animations. She began working on the subject of money laundering in 2018, when she took an interest in the films of little-known director Jess Bond, formerly Jessica Manafort – the daughter of Paul Manafort, Donald Trump's former campaign adviser convicted of money laundering in 2019, and pardoned by Trump in 2020.

Brewer's 2021 work *Private Client Services* shows exactly how money laundering works, making profit from criminal activity difficult to trace or appear to come from legal sources. The performance and video follows the artist as she attempts to launder money herself, by acquiring an artwork. This led to *Offshore* (2024), a video that premiered in Brewer's breakout exhibition at the Canary Test in Los Angeles last year. A "how-to" guide for artists interested in navigating the world of global finance, *Offshore* is a poignant and wry meditation on the well-established link between global art prices and income inequality – particularly as they impact working-class artists. We follow her to various locations such as Ugland House, a building in the Cayman Islands that is home to 18,857 corporate entities, and the Geneva Freeport, which houses billions of dollars in untaxed art. She snorkels, eats fondue, and "learns how to set up an international corporate architecture to cover my tracks," as she put it when I visited her studio.

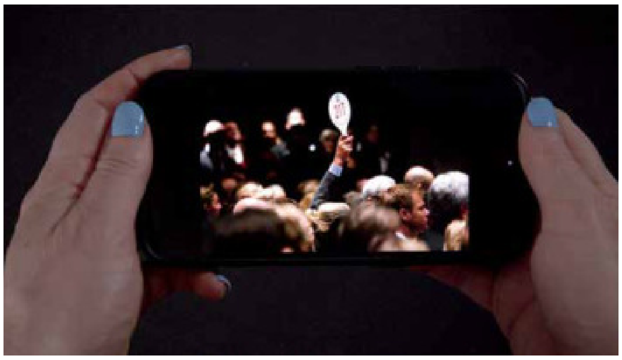
Brewer is currently working on a project titled *Leverage*, which explores various dynamics between debtors, creditors, and that which cannot be repaid. The first chapter of this video project, recently on view at Timeshare Gallery in Los Angeles, is a portrait of prominent investor, art collector, and MoMA trustee Daniel Sundheim told through the story of his art-backed loans. We see Sundheim, as Brewer explained, "using his art collection as collateral for loans, which he used to buy more art, which, in turn, became collateral for more loans, and so on." As part of her research for these works, Brewer has been working full-time as a private investigator for three years. But she interweaves this expertise with humor to highlight the absurdity of financial machinations, as well as their palpable effects on artists' lives.

In January, Brewer lost her apartment and most of her belongings to the Eaton Fire. Such sudden and devastating loss highlighted for her how both money and art have become untethered from actual physical objects. If art and money, as she describes them, are both "dematerialized social constructs," where does that leave those of us for whom everyday existence remains urgently material?

– Aliza Shvarts

Two stills from Maura Brewer's video *Private Client Services*, 2021.

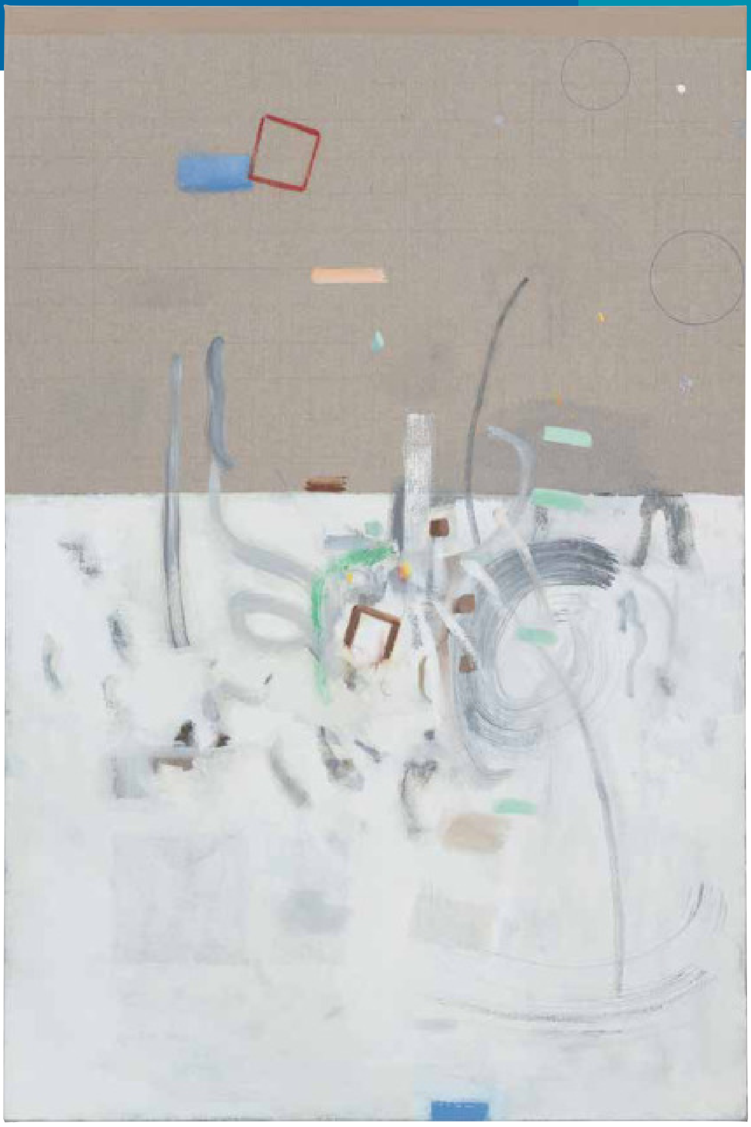
Below, a still from *Offshore*, 2024, and bottom, view of the video installation *Offshore*, 2024, at the Canary Test, Los Angeles.

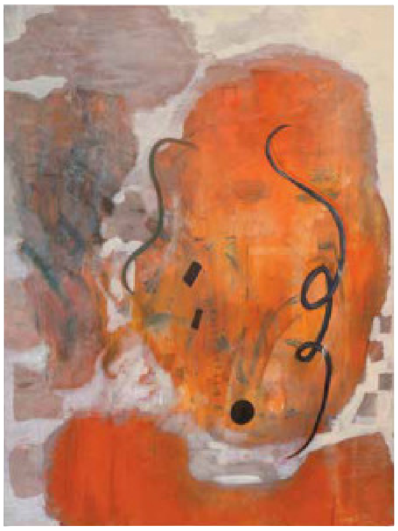


From top: Courtesy Maura Brewer (2); Courtesy Maura Brewer; Photo Kell Yang-Sammataro

LIBASSE KA

Rugged canvases channel chaos and calm.





Libasse Ka: Untitled, 2023 (left), and Untitled, 2024 (right).

▶ **Libasse Ka's paintings offer inventive solutions to thoroughly** painterly problems. Take an untitled canvas from 2025, which features a dark silhouette of an umbrella that Ka painted on a piece of newspaper and then pressed onto the surface of his canvas, transferring the image before throwing the newspaper away. Painting the umbrella directly on the canvas "would have been too literal," he explained when I visited his Brussels studio.

Ka's works, with their pale surfaces, are mostly abstract, though oscillate between free gestures and recognizable forms – an umbrella, a car, a human in silhouette wielding a hammer, etc. They vary in size, with recent works tending toward larger canvases.

Ka's unconventional approach took root in direct opposition to his training. He moved from Senegal to Belgium in 2010, and enrolled briefly in an art school in Brussels in 2019 – L'École nationale supérieure des arts visuels de La Cambre. But he left after just a few months, frustrated by its rigid conservatism.

Then, in 2023, his career took an unexpected turn while he was working at an electronics store, where he encountered the Colombian artist Oscar Murillo. Murillo recognized Ka's talent immediately from images of paintings that the young artist showed on his phone, and offered him a stipend to paint full-time, allowing him to quit the electronics job and hone his practice. This connection led Ka to Vanessa Carlos, founder of Carlos/Ishikawa gallery in London, who soon began representing him.

Soon, Ka was exhibiting internationally, and last October at Art Basel Paris, Carlos/Ishikawa gave him a solo booth. This year, his first institutional solo will open at the Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens in Belgium.

When I visited Ka's palatial apartment-studio in Brussels, I noticed painting and art books littering every surface. As he spoke about influences, he hesitated at my note-taking. "I don't want to seem derivative," he admitted. While echoes of Cy Twombly, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Sigmar Polke may be present, Ka's paintings are more than the sum of their constitutive parts: They are chaotic yet fertile spaces for the emergence of something new and unexpected.

His studio was filled with large canvases dominated by shades of gray and beige. Yet despite their restrained palette, they each contain a rich diversity of marks and textures. Ka gestured toward a sticky, yellowed splotch on one painting and said, "it's varnish," inviting me to touch it. I could barely contain my exhilaration as I ran my hand over his work: His obviously tactile paintings are begging to be touched.

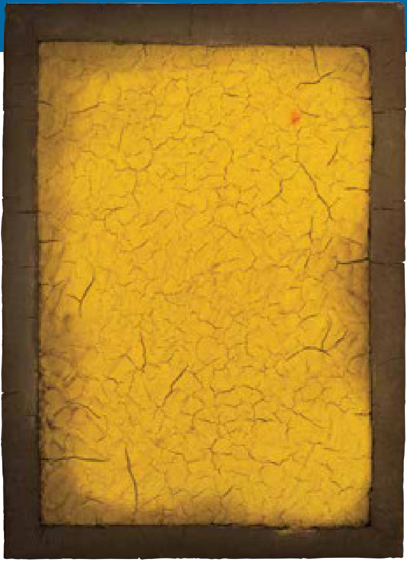
A series of drawings spread across his floor provided further insight into his thinking. One sketch depicted a knight driving a lance through a dragon, while a small cameraman lurked in the margins. "It changes the way you see it, right?" Ka chuckled. "Suddenly, it's not just a battle – it's a film set." This subtle disruption of perception is present in his paintings too. There, Ka subtly responds to the omnipresence of the camera in modern life, imposing something both rugged and methodical instead – a refreshing contrast to the slick scroll of the social media feed.

– Wilson Tarbox

Photo Damian Griffiths/©Libasse Ka/Courtesy Carlos/Ishikawa, London (2)

JACKIE AMÉZQUITA

A sculptor's baked bricks pay tribute to the history of migration in LA.



Jackie Amézquita: *horizon*, 2024.

▶ **This past winter, Jackie Amézquita had several** test bricks arranged neatly on a table in her studio in Los Angeles. In a departure from earlier work, each of these bricks, made with soil and *masa de maíz* (corn dough), had been inset with a mixture containing other organic materials – blue pea flower, cocoa, cochineal, charcoal, bee pollen, coffee beans, achiote – that gave them brilliant hues of blue and mauve or deep tones of ochre and black. That so many biomaterials are easily accessible in LA speaks to the city's history of migration and the legacies of colonialism, Amézquita said.

She started using soil in her work after a performance in which she walked from Tijuana to LA over eight days. Every time she finished a bottle of water, she'd fill it with soil. By the journey's end, she had collected some 18 samples – and began thinking about her findings as an archive and a site of memory. She remembers wondering, "If Earth could speak, what would it say? What stories would Earth share?"

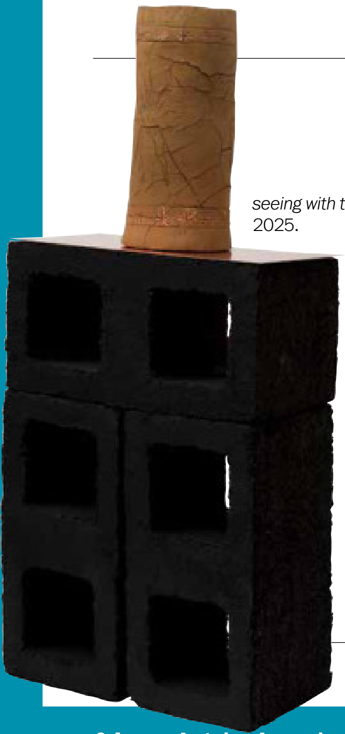
Amézquita recalled the creation myth in the *Popol Vuh*, in which, after some trial and error, the gods used corn to make the first humans. To make her bricks, she freezes them to hold their shape and then bakes them in an oven for several hours, flipping them every so often in a process she compared to cooking tortillas on a comal. After they've dried and before a second bake, she takes them outside to receive some light. "I think of the sun as giving life and other energy to the work," she said.

It took her about two years to perfect the balance in her soil-and-masa bricks, which have figured in multiple works, including her 2023 installation *El suelo que nos alimenta*. The wall-size piece, commissioned by the Hammer Museum for that year's Made in L.A. biennial, comprises 144 square bricks made with soil from each of LA's neighborhoods and incised with drawings representing different communities.

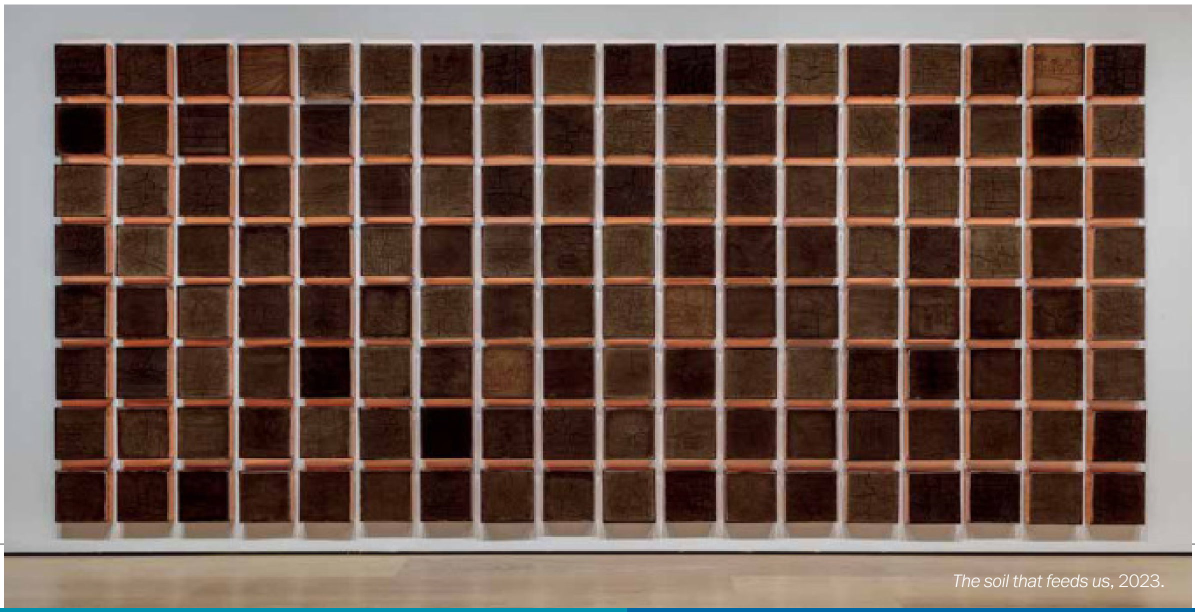
Her brick-related works also evoke the history of migration, which is a central concern to Amézquita's practice – especially as it relates to her family. She moved to LA from Guatemala in 2003, following her mother, who moved in 1987. Her grandmother migrated from Mexico to Guatemala during the Cristero War in the 1920s and lost her most important documents along the way. "She had to start again from the ashes," said Amézquita, who added that her grandmother's resilience got her thinking: "How can we rebuild the pillars of histories that have been erased, trying to understand and piece everything together?"

Such questions inspired her to introduce charcoal and ash into her work, just before the wildfires in January ravaged parts of LA and severely impacted many of her friends. She sees them now as a metaphor for regeneration. "We're still standing," she said. "We're still holding on. We can create something out of what was erased or destroyed."

– Maximíliano Durón



seeing with the soul, 2025.

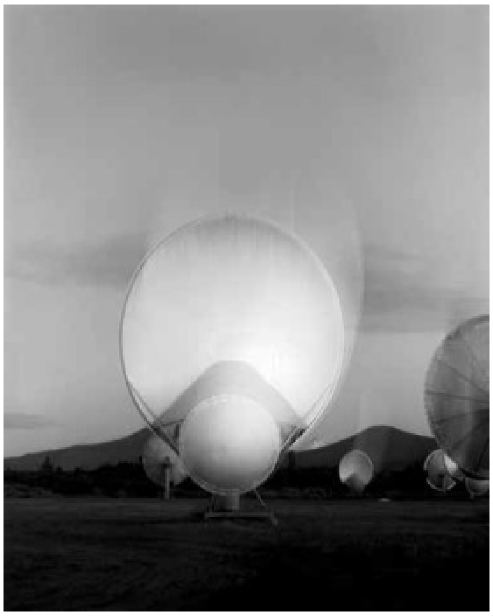


The soil that feeds us, 2023.

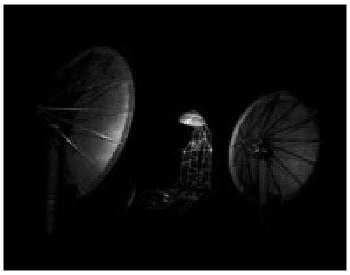
Top and left: Photos Yubo Dong/Courtesy Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles (2); Right: Photo Joshua White/Courtesy Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

BRITTANY NELSON

Interplanetary pictures evoke loneliness and longing.



Brittany Nelson: *Observing 1*, 2024.



Print insert: *Crashed Dish (Allen Telescope Array)*, 2024.

▶ **The emptiness of outer space incites a surprising kind of** yearning in Brittany Nelson. "I Can't Make You Love Me," her 2024 show at PATRON Gallery in Chicago, drew on her interests in science-fiction archives, travelogue videos, and early photochemistry techniques – all soundtracked by a heartrending Bonnie Raitt ballad that mines the desire in unrequited love ("I can't make you love me if you don't / you can't make your heart feel something it won't").

Nelson's engagement with the erotics of extraterrestrial subject matter was inspired by an unusual muse: the storied Mars rover, Opportunity. "I call her a lesbian icon," the artist said, adopting the feminine pronoun that NASA attached to the robot during its 2004–18 service on the Red Planet. "She's one of the farthest-roaming robots we've ever sent off-planet, and she took an insane amount of images," Nelson told me when I visited her studio in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. "She was on an expedition alone, doing these butch rock experiments while [casting] glances across the landscape, which is an absolute lesbian trope: the longing glance, never to close the distance."

To lend pathos to Opportunity's images, Nelson printed composites of them using the bromoil process, an early 20th-century technique that gives photographs a more ethereal, painterly look. Source pictures from NASA "are so amazing but are only shared on science-y, techno-fetishy blogs," she said, noting that they tend to be treated as data sets more than aesthetic entities. "I wanted to put the romanticism back in the images."

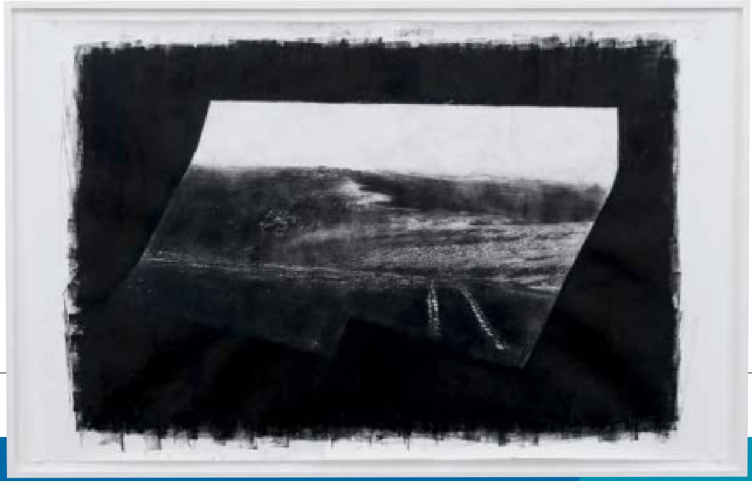
She also found metaphorical resonance in more personal terms. Recalling her upbringing in a "cultural vacuum" in Montana, Nelson said, "I started thinking about having to reverse-engineer what it was like to be a gay person stuck in a very isolated environment. Then all of these parallels with space exploration and sci-fi became apparent."

In her studio, secreted within a former military supply base dating back to World War I, Nelson works with a giant Fotar photo enlarger from the 1950s – "we call it Lord Fotar," she said – that moves along floor tracks to project negatives, allowing for prints of formidable size. (Her largest so far is three by seven feet.) But she also works with other technologies: *everything but the signature is me* (2023) is a typewriter she programmed to type a single word – *Starbear* – culled from flirty letters exchanged by sci-fi writers Ursula K. Le Guin and Alice B. Sheldon, who wrote under the pseudonym James Tiptree Jr.

Nelson's new work focuses on enormous telescope arrays, started as an artist-in-residence at the SETI Institute, a Silicon Valley–based nonprofit studying the presence of life and intelligence beyond Earth. Last year, she showed photographs of a telescope array in California in a two-person exhibition (with Joanne Leonard) at Luhring Augustine in New York. For a solo show next year at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, she is making work inspired by one of the world's largest radio telescopes, at the Green Bank Observatory in West Virginia. "I'm in the middle of it, struggling," she said of her work in progress. "But I'm personifying the telescope in some way, almost treating it like an ex-girlfriend."

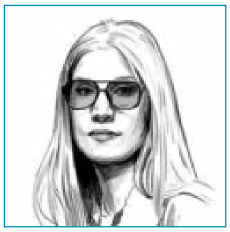
– Andy Battaglia

Tracks 1, 2019.

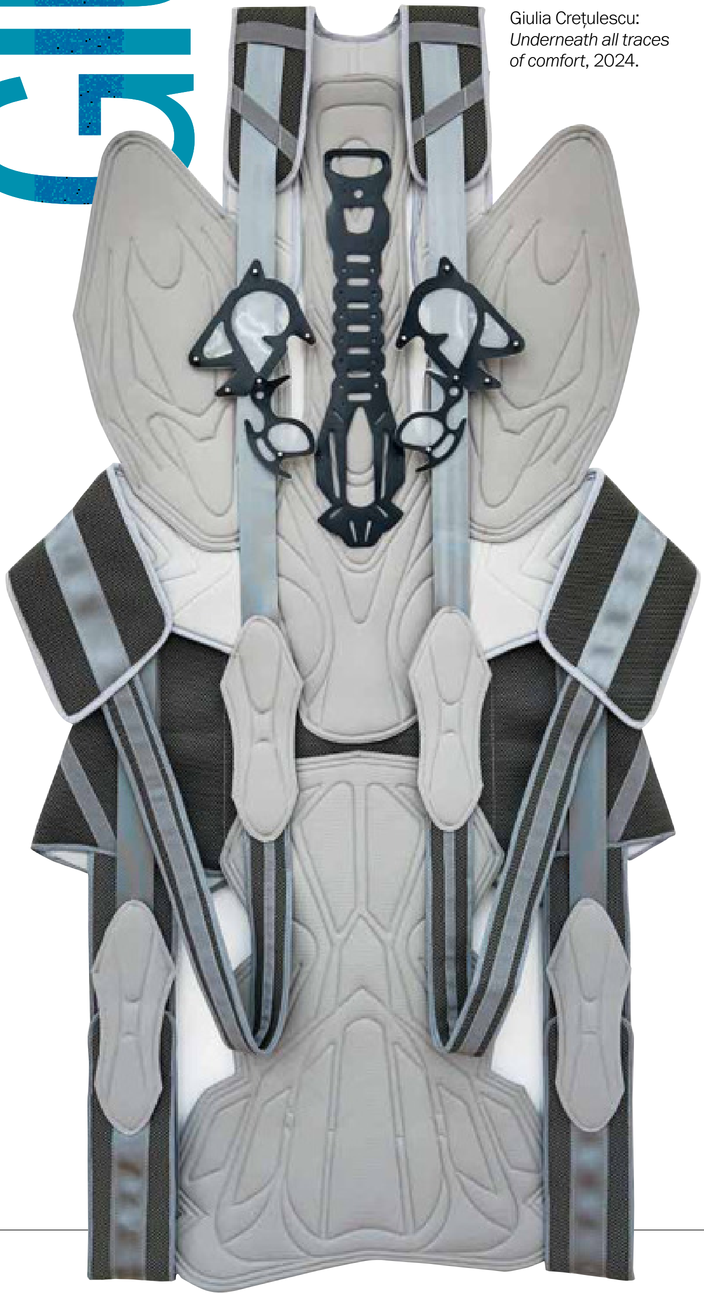


From top: Photo Farzad Owrang/Courtesy Luhring Augustine, New York; Courtesy Brittany Nelson; Photo Evan Jenkins/Courtesy Patron Gallery, Chicago

GIULIA CREȚULESCU



A Romanian fiber artist makes synthetic fabric sexy.



Giulia Crețulescu: *Underneath all traces of comfort*, 2024.

Fiber art is everywhere these days, in case you haven't heard. And the trend tends toward work that is clearly labor-intensive and handmade, favoring folk traditions and natural fibers – which is hardly how any of us encounters fibers in the wild.

Giulia Crețulescu's work stands apart for being made of material that's more familiar: synthetic fabric. She sources it from a Ford automotive factory near her hometown – Craiova, Romania – repurposing the stuff of cheap seats. It's rare to see such ubiquitous surfaces without a single stain. Even more impressively, Crețulescu manages to make the material somehow sexy.

This has a lot to do with all the straps that hang off her works, bondage-like. And the scale: her geometric shapes, mounted on walls, are roughly torso size. The straps include repurposed industrial seatbelts and other appendages that are intricately handmade. With Crețulescu's craftsmanship, it's tough to tell the difference between elements found and fabricated.

Crețulescu recently completed a PhD program in graphic arts in Bucharest. Her training is evident in the armor-like outlines she stitches as if in bas relief. She started sewing after growing frustrated with graphic design work that, done on a computer, "goes so fast." Working with her hands, she found "a place to breathe." Then, doubling down on resisting efficiency, she decided against making anything functional at all.

Before using Ford fabric, Crețulescu used pinstriped cotton, resulting in abstractions more like clothing that resemble armor-corset-suit conglomerates. They are decidedly androgynous and exquisitely tailored, made of material she bought as deadstock and will therefore never find again. That's deliberate: Crețulescu bemoaned how clothes pile up in landfills, the synthetic fabrics resisting degradation. "I love fashion, but I cannot bring more clothes into the world," she said when we spoke, shortly after she had returned to Romania following an impressive show at New York's Fragment Gallery.

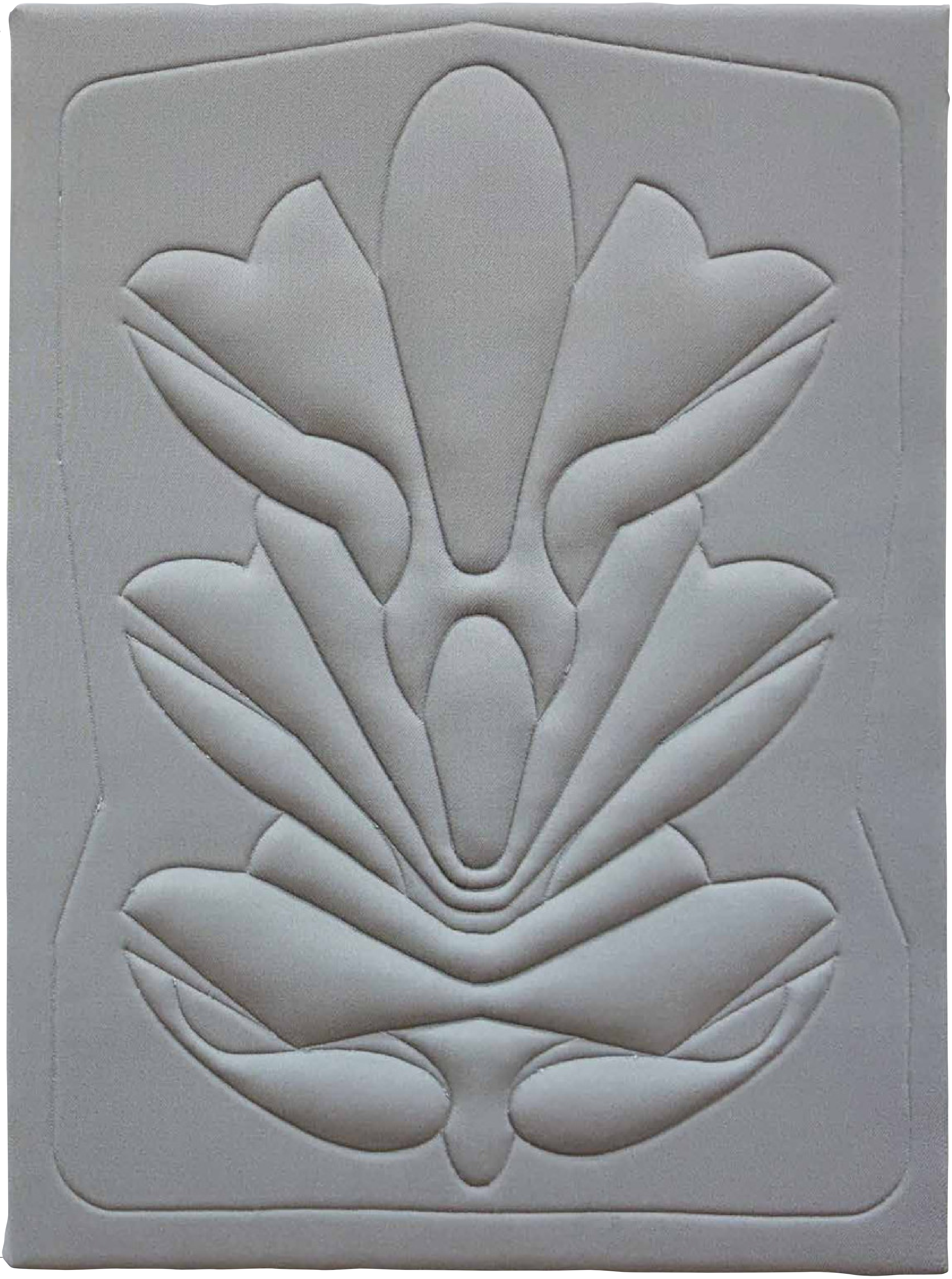
Growing up in an auto-industry town, Crețulescu became especially enamored of motorcycle gear. "It's very graphic, and very close to the body," she noted, describing padded jackets designed to protect the spinal cord. Such features began to stand out as she grappled with health concerns of her own, prompting her to think of motorcycle gear as contemporary armor. Soon she got into medieval armor too, fascinated by the way it can abstract anatomies into graphic geometries.

Crețulescu's shapes evolve in drawings, then she makes patterns to scale. Though they are armor-inspired, the thought of executing jagged angles in metal struck her as unpleasant, sharp edges having as much potential to cause injury as to prevent it.

Her process shows that she thinks not only about the look but also the feel of her work. This gives her an advantage over those Minimalists who wanted to make art that viewers engage with their bodies as much as with their brains. Often, they did so in shapes and materials that were cold and uninviting, like metal squares. Crețulescu's is definitively work that you feel in your bones.

– *Emily Watlington*

Courtesy Fragment Gallery, New York



Wound and womb, 2024.

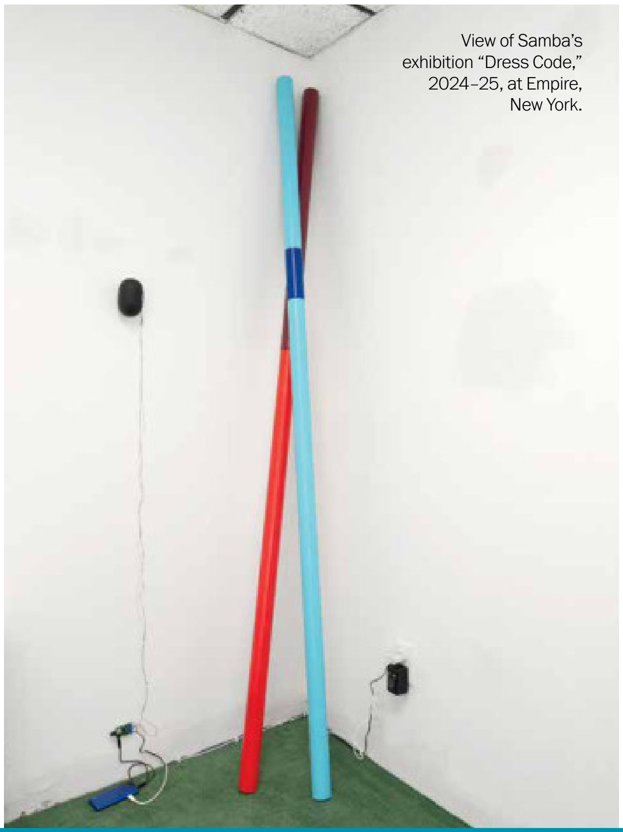
Courtesy Fragment Gallery, New York

COUMBA SAMBA

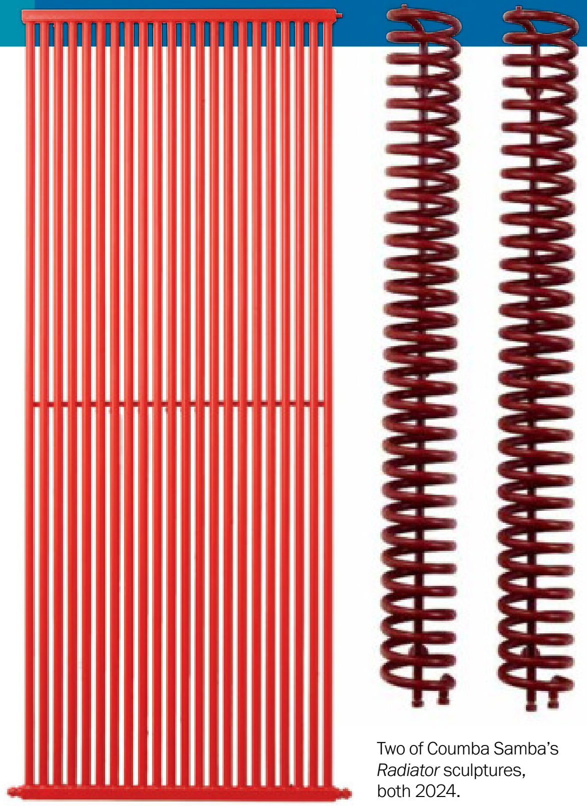
Abstractions obscure highly specific references.

▶ **When it's business as usual in the United Nations** General Assembly, debates over international laws and their global impact are coolly waged, their real-time minutes of interest largely to diplomats and reporters. But lately, these summits have gained an unexpected follower in Coumba Samba, an artist who is fascinated by the possibility of so many representatives of different nations gathered in one room. A livestream of these summits in 2024 even constituted a piece unto itself in Samba's show at Empire, a tiny gallery in an office building located a 20-minute walk from the UN's New York headquarters.

Within the UN, these emissaries' words were of great importance, with the potential to impact the world more broadly. At Empire, their statements acted as background noise to the show, titled "Dress Code." It consisted of little more than several poles, green carpeting, and the phones and speakers that played footage of live UN meetings. Samba procured the poles from construction companies, then painted them with colored bands of irregular sizes referring to national flags. One of them prominently featured red, white, and blue, which Samba said gestured toward "colonial powers," the flags of so many colonizer nations sharing these hues. "I'm interested in color and power," Samba said when I met with her in New York.



View of Samba's exhibition "Dress Code," 2024–25, at Empire, New York.



Two of Coumba Samba's *Radiator* sculptures, both 2024.

Samba has exhibited canvases as well as found objects—wooden pallets, discarded radiators—painted in hues that pay homage to highly specific yet sometimes elusive sources. *Stripe Blinds* (2023), for example, is a broken set of Venetian blinds whose slats were painted lime green, mustard yellow, and gray, the colors of an ensemble Samba's sister wore during her modeling days. But without these sentimental details, the work can feel cold and impersonal. In converting these stories into the ostensibly universal language of abstraction, all the intimacy is lost.

That's deliberate. Samba's interest in the way things get lost in translation derives from her transnational lifestyle. Born in Harlem, she was raised in Senegal for 5 years before her family returned to New York; she now splits her time between that city and various European hubs, including Basel, where, in September, she will show new work at the Kunsthalle. Shuttling back and forth across the Atlantic, she said, has allowed her to observe what she called a "cause-and-effect" phenomenon, referring to trash: The refuse of European nations commonly washes up on the shores of African nations like Senegal.

A 2024 solo show at London's Arcadia Missa featured a set of wall-mounted radiators that Samba painted in monochromes, so that they resembled the squares and rectangles one might associate with Russian Suprematist painting. The Russian connection was deliberate: An accompanying booklet featured an essay by dealer Mischa Lustin addressing what he called "red gas," or the petroleum exported from Russia to warm homes around the world. Russia's invasion of Ukraine resulted in sanctions on oil, Lustin pointed out, and a European energy crisis ensued. Samba's radiators may have been monochromatic, but they were "not supposed to be complete abstraction," she said. Instead, they spoke to global supply chains, both material and ideological.

—*Alex Greenberger*

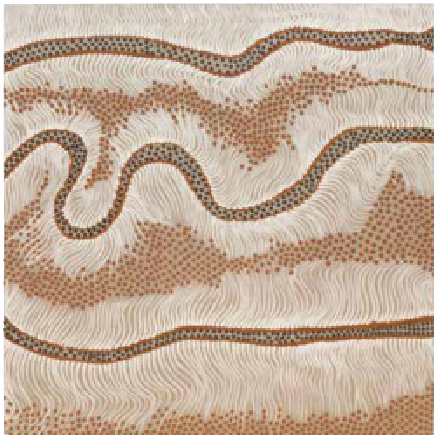
From left: Photo Jason Loebs/Courtesy Empire, New York; Photos Tom Carter/Courtesy Arcadia Missa, London (2)

An Indigenous painter in São Paulo communes with his rural home.

AISLAN PANKARARU

▶ **On the second floor of a building in São Paulo** suffused with sounds of the city and fumes from an auto shop below, Aislan Pankararu's studio teems with reminders of his rural home in the *sertão nordestino*, Brazil's northeastern hinterland. Leather hides sent by his father hang from the ceiling beside a bundled mass of dried *croá* stalks. Large paintings lean against the walls, marked by evocative abstractions and undulating lines that suggest subterranean networks of roots. Dots and plus signs in other works look like energy fields that radiate from nucleic cores (or "cellular universes," as Pankararu called them during my visit).

Since moving to the city in 2021, Pankararu has maintained a dialogue with his more remote homeland through a practice that pulls from his studies in medicine, references to the flora and fauna of Brazil's interior, and the charged ritual drawings of his people, the Indigenous Pankararu. (He adopted his surname to proudly acknowledge "an ancestral legacy that must be well cared for," he said.)



Aislan Pankararu: *Direction of Healing*, 2024.

Licensed as a physician after years of study in Brasília, Pankararu returned to his childhood love of drawing while completing his medical residency in 2019. Just a few weeks before the outbreak of Covid-19, he opened an exhibition of drawings at the Hospital Universitário de Brasília, where he worked. By the end of 2021, Pankararu had appeared in 10 more shows, and he has since participated in exhibitions at the Museu Nacional da República in Brasília and Museu de Arte de São Paulo. Last year, he received the prestigious PIPA Prize, which celebrates emerging Brazilian talent.

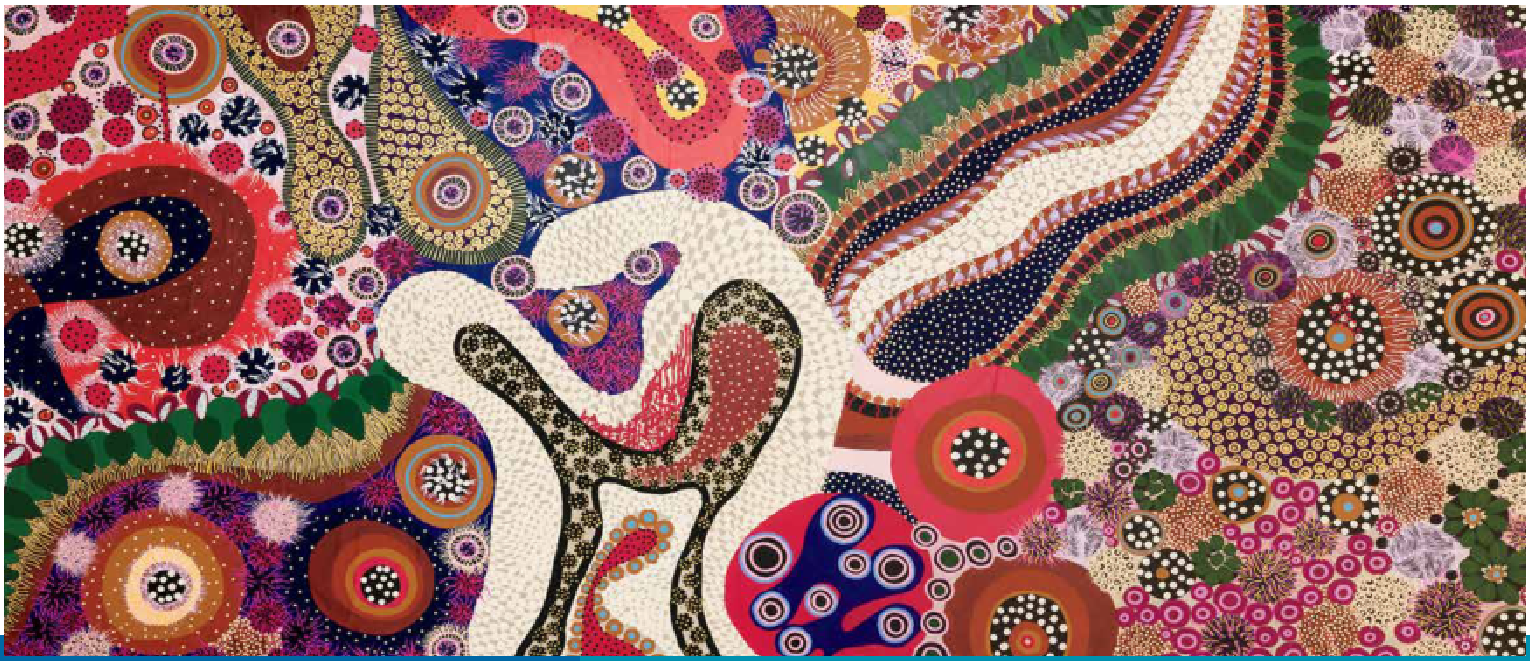
Pankararu's subdued color palette evokes northeastern Brazil's Caatinga biome, where dry shrubs and thorny trees are gestural marks against the sepia tones of sandy earth. The environment is deeply entwined with Pankararu culture. "There is no Pankararu calendar without the Caatinga," the artist said of his people's relationship with the seasonal cycles of different plants.

In a series of works titled "Soil" (2024), painted in clay-pigmented acrylic, Pankararu blurs micro- and macroscopic views while evoking cell membranes, wave forms, arboreal growth rings, and topographic maps. In his "Touch" series (2024), white and black dots vibrate over planes that peel from raw linen to reveal a russet-painted ground. Other works like *A Redescoberta* (The Rediscovery, 2024) burst with energetic colors such as fuchsia, violet, and green – not unlike a landscape springing to life after summer rains.

Pankararu's technique of painting with clay also alludes to the *Toré*, a ceremonial dance for which performers' bodies are covered in emblematic designs. Painting his canvases as he might a dancer's skin, he evokes a feeling of movement and aligns his work with sacred ritual – but more suggestively than directly, so as to maintain a sense of secrecy essential to Pankararu tradition. "There is a mystery called silence," he told me, "and I will walk hand in hand with it."

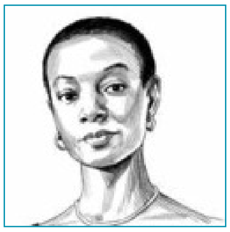
– *Nicole Kaack*

A Redescoberta (The Rediscovery), 2024.

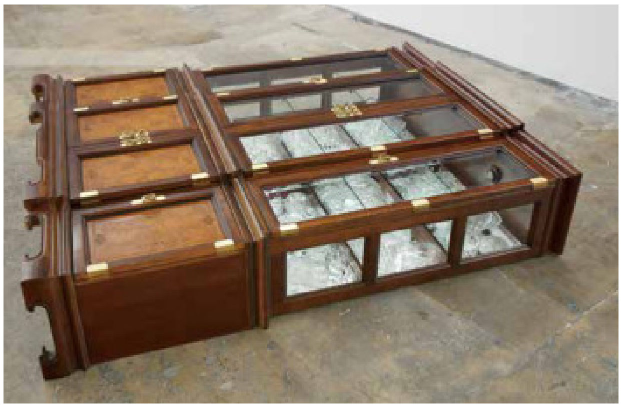


From top: Courtesy Aislan Pankararu; Photo Estúdio em Obra, São Paulo

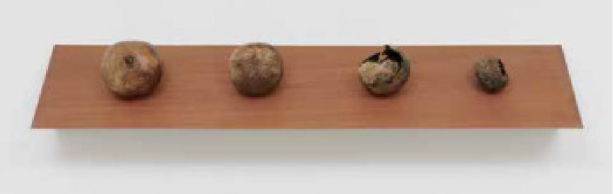
RHEA DILLON



A British sculptor makes oblique portraits of the Black diaspora.

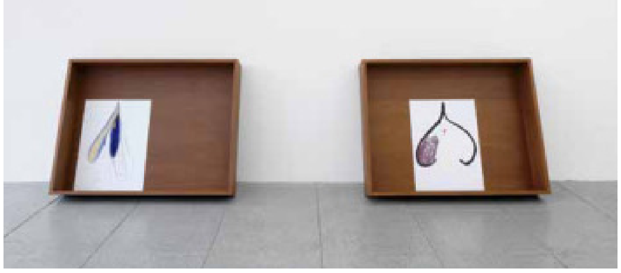


Rhea Dillon: *A Caribbean Ossuary*, 2022.



Swollen, Whole, Broken, Birthed in the Broken; Broken Birthed, Broken, Deficient, Whole—At the Black Womb's Altar, At the Black Woman's Tale, 2023.

View of Dillon's performance *Catgut—The Opera*, 2021, at the Serpentine Galleries, London.



View of the exhibition "Gestural Poetics," 2024, showing *piercing space and parting seas* and *Prayer.*, both 2024, at Soft Opening, London.

▶ **Within Rhea Dillon's studio cubicle at the Whitney** Independent Study Program (ISP), the artist and writer talked quietly about preparations for three exhibitions, opening weeks apart over the summer: her ISP group exhibition; a solo show at the Heidelberger Kunstverein; and a booth in the Statements section of Art Basel Switzerland. Famed for Marxist-leaning, theory-rich seminars, the ISP is a clear fit for the 29-year-old artist, who has temporarily transplanted from South London; her work engages a canon of Black and Caribbean historians, novelists, and poets including Kamau Brathwaite, Beverley Bryan, June Jordan, and Sylvia Wynter.

A second-generation British citizen with family in Jamaica, the artist often draws from her correspondence with the Caribbean, and critiques the sociopolitical ceilings inherited with diasporic identity. Sculptures such as *A Caribbean Ossuary* (2022)—included last year in "Tituba, qui pour nous protéger?" (Tituba, who protects us?) at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris—suggest an immigrant's aspirational longing for Old World luxury. The work presents a mahogany cabinet, echoing one owned by the artist's grandmother, tipped on its back and seeming to float like a ship across the gallery floor. Within, items from a cut-crystal tea service (for when "the queen came") hover atop a mirrored backing.

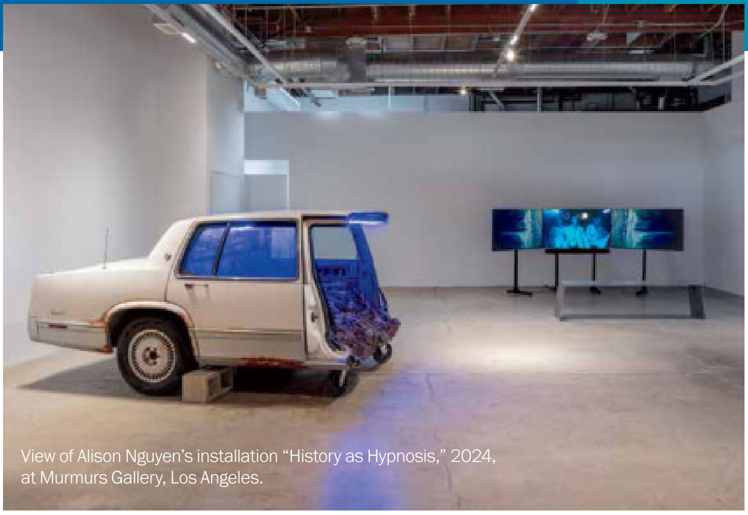
Dillon often produces sculptures like this one, crafting visceral portraits of postcolonial Black experiences from everyday objects, symbols, and language. Reflecting on her work's territorial politics, Dillon said, "I think about land very physically now—soil, as opposed to geographies or trajectories," citing American anthropologist Vanessa Agard-Jones.

Dillon's 2024 exhibition "An Alterable Terrain" at Tate Britain bridged the body and its diaspora through fauna. She presented a fragmentary Black woman, abstracted in a sparsely arranged constellation of sculptures representative of eyes, mouth, lungs, hands, feet, and reproductive organs. In *Swollen, Whole, Broken, Birthed in the Broken; Broken Birthed, Broken, Deficient, Whole—At the Black Womb's Altar, At the Black Woman's Tale* (2023), dried calabash gourds are mounted on an angled plinth of sapele mahogany; some fractured, some whole, they stand in for womb, breasts, and vagina. Dillon calls out the commodity equivalence slavery drew between human flesh and wood, and underlines the parallel migrations of Black people and plant life.

Complementing her theoretical rigor with "poethics" (per the artist, borrowing poet Joan Retallack's term), Dillon imbues her artworks with linguistic slippages and nonsensical evasions. Dillon's writing favors elision and repetition, the latter shaping sections of her libretto for *Catgut—The Opera*, performed at the Serpentine Galleries in London in 2021. Pointing to photographs in her studio, Dillon explained this linguistic approach through a series of drawings central to "Gestural Poetics" at Paul Soto Gallery in Los Angeles last year. Originating when Dillon learned that "spade" was a racial slur, the oil stick drawings repeatedly rehearse the contours of the playing card icon, distorting the derogatory expression into a tree, a shield, or a pair of breasts. Looking over the recurrent symmetries of her drawings, the artist wondered, "Can I extend a definition? Or can I create a new definition through repetition?"

—Nicole Kaack

From top: Photos Theo Christelis/Courtesy Soft Opening, London (2); Photo Henry Jay Kammy/Courtesy Serpentine Galleries, London; Photo Paul Salveson/Courtesy Soft Opening, London



View of Alison Nguyen's installation "History as Hypnosis," 2024, at Murmurs Gallery, Los Angeles.

ALISON NGUYEN

A video artist channels history's strange side.

▶ **"There's something sublime about surfaces," Alison** Nguyen told me in her studio in New York City's Chinatown. "What do they reveal about the torrents beneath them?" It's easy to dismiss the deceptive facades of the digital realm. But in Nguyen's practice – which spans video, installation, performance, and sculpture – surfaces are sites of mystery and possibility. Her video works, which explore American mythologies, visual culture, and digital labor practices, unfold uncanny worlds from shreds of history.

Nguyen grew up in New Jersey and made a habit of "sneaking" into the city, where she scoured Manhattan's art and film offerings. A graduate of Brown University, where she took classes in the department of modern culture and media (because "all the freaks and dissidents were there"), Nguyen found her groove as an artist after a period of winging it and taking odd jobs in post-recession New York: She was a nanny, event photographer, and, eventually, a researcher for a film production company's art department.

It should come as no surprise, given Nguyen's winding early years, that her work is so referentially eclectic, drawing from low and high culture. In *History as Hypnosis* (2023), which has been screened in theaters and rearranged into installations, a trio of enigmatic Vietnamese women are driven around the desert and released into a glossy downtown Los Angeles. Composed of eerie tableaux and ultradistant long shots that close in with creeping zooms, the work gestures at American road movies like *Thelma and Louise,* obliquely linking their ideas about geography and identity to the immigrant's plight and the ghosts of American imperialism.

Change Order (2024) and the upcoming *Aisle 9* are both inspired by the archives of a Taiwanese family's hosiery business in New York. Though Nguyen, who is Vietnamese American, doesn't shy away from the personal, she sees her individual history, and her family's connection to the Asian diaspora, as a means of sparking even bigger questions about modern existence. "Leaning too hard into one thing is just not interesting to me," Nguyen said, pointing to the women's blackened teeth in *History as Hypnosis* as an example of how she employs and expands her own identity in her work: Her grandmother's friend from Saigon blackened her teeth – a traditional cosmetic practice in Vietnam – but Nguyen decontextualizes the ritual. "I don't want it to scream ethnographic or other, I just want it to feel bizarre and intriguing."

A self-proclaimed "tech nerd," Nguyen is a coder and an amateur graphic designer, skills that have informed her use of virtual spaces and algorithmic intelligence. In 2019, with her collaborator Achim Koh, she created a machine learning program called Andra8, which Nguyen visualized as a humanoid woman in the video installation piece *My Favorite Software Is Being Here.* Andra8, an AI assistant, content creator, and data aggregator rolled up in one simulated being, epitomizes exploited labor. Yet Nguyen, against expectations, urges us to embrace Andra8's state of alterity. "AI isn't the enemy," she said. "It's the curators and artists who are already acting like AI and using these technologies in deadened ways." At the end of the film, Andra8 throws a milkshake out of the window and develops her own subjectivity – it's a call for us to do the same.

– *Beatrice Loayza*

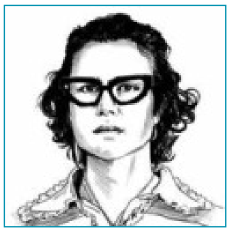
View of Nguyen's installation "At Odds With," showing *Change Order,* 2024, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Aisle 9, 2025.

Top: Photo Zak Kelley/Courtesy Murmurs Gallery, Los Angeles; Bottom left: Photo Zeshan Ahmed; Bottom right: Courtesy Alison Nguyen

AGNES QUESTIONMARK

A sculptor and biohacker crafts tentacular trans-ness.



▶ **It seemed fitting that my studio visit with Agnes** Questionmark took place in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, as there's an aquatic dimension to all her work. Her key preoccupation is the trans body, meaning at once transgender, transhuman, and trans-species, but if she could become anything, I believe it would be a sea creature, with fins or tentacles, or both.

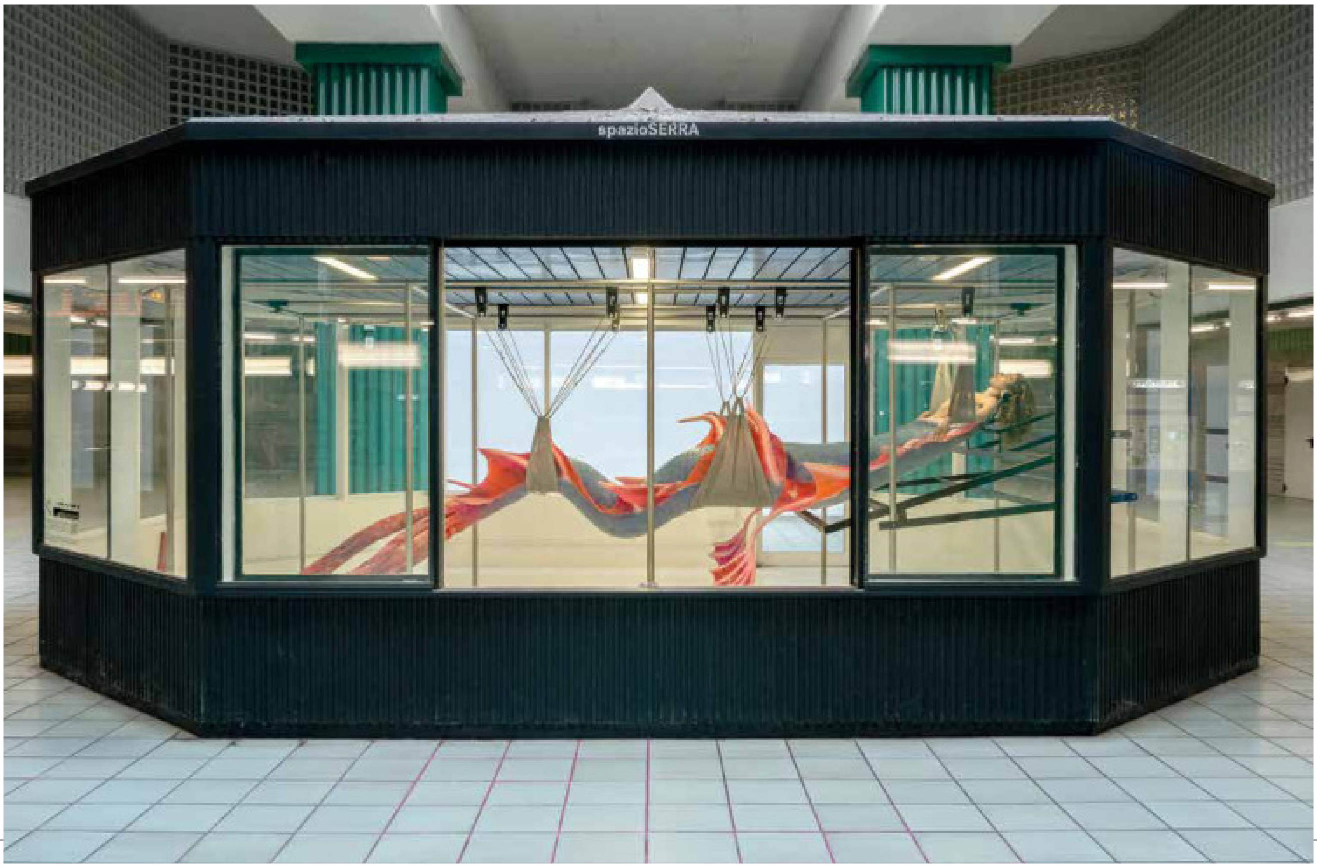
Questionmark is best known for elaborate multimedia performance works, but in between those, she keeps busy. Her current work starts with images printed on fabric, then over-painted with a mix of acrylic paint and silicone. Most are of hearts and other organs, in vivid reds and oranges, sensuous yet uncanny. She let me touch them. I wanted to press my cheek against them, but as we'd just met, it felt presumptuous to ask.

She shared with me some of her research material, her deep dive into specialized medical technology companies. One company has machines that keep human lungs, livers, and hearts going while awaiting transplants. Its website looks just like those for companies that sell industrial air conditioners or deep fryers: They enlist corporate aesthetics, but for human organ machines. "I'm interested in the usually unseen integration of flesh and tech," she says.

Her favorite medium is silicone. It's uncanny stuff, almost like flesh but not quite. It's inert enough to stay inside the human body. Since both Questionmark and I are transgender, we talked about our experiences with body modification, details I won't share as they're just for us girls. Being trans can lead to all sorts of adventures with the medical-industrial complex, although everyone's body is enmeshed with machines in weird ways.

What else might a body become? That seems to be the question motivating Questionmark, particularly since her 2021 work *TRANSGENESIS*. Both an installation and a performance staged at Harlesden Highstreet in London saw the artist transformed into a giant hybrid creature, tentacles coiling beneath her. She gently waved her arms, as if under water, 8 hours a day for 23 days.

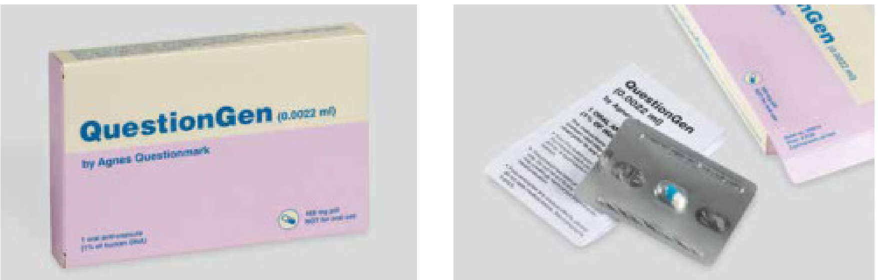
Later, in *CHM13hTERT* (2023), Questionmark again became some kind of chimeric sea creature, this time with fins.



View of Agnes Questionmark's installation and performance *CHM13hTERT*, 2023, at spazioSERRA in the Milano Lancetti train station.

Photo Cristiano Rizzo/Courtesy spazioSERRA, Milan

Right, *QuestionGen (0.0022 ml)*, 2024.

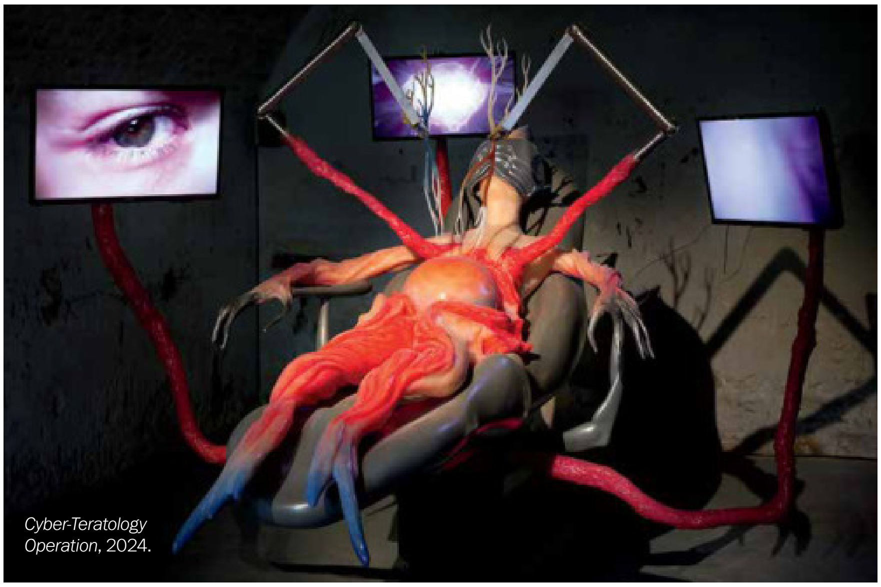


She spent 12 hours a day for 16 days in a glass enclosure at a subway station in Milan, suspended via slings and cables in a casing with a mermaid-like tail some 20 feet long. Something about monstrousness can be triggering: She tells me of viewers who yelled at her and banged on the glass. The title *CHM13hTERT* refers to a cell line developed to study the human genome. For Questionmark, this encoding means that, “perhaps one day, we will be able to modify it and shape it as we wish.”

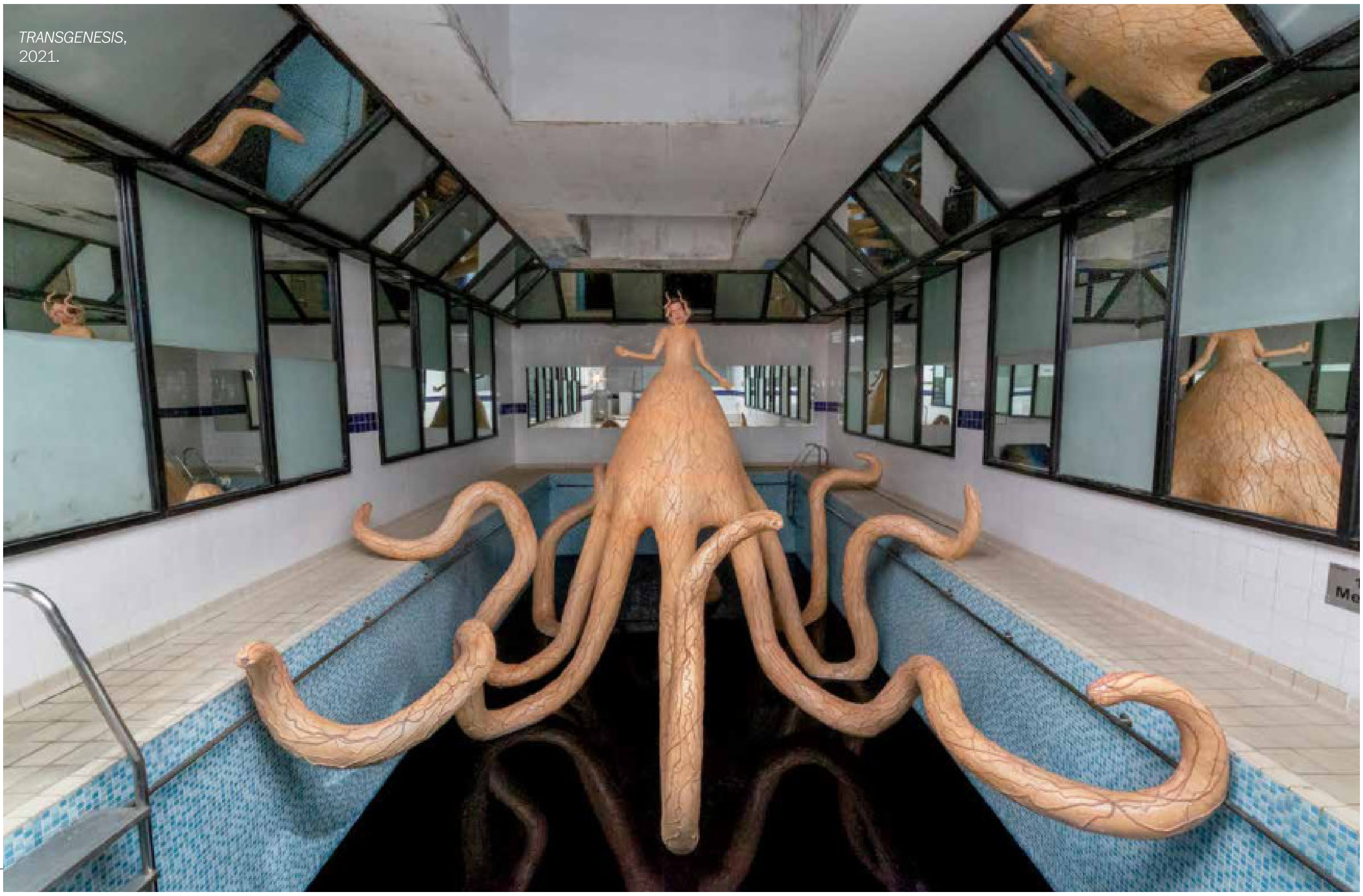
Questionmark made a recent artist’s edition, *QuestionGen* (2024), with biohacker Josie Zayner and the Italian publisher Nero. It’s a single capsule containing a bit of Questionmark’s DNA, boxed up in a blister pack like a regular prescription drug, complete with a *misinformation* leaflet.

What I love about Questionmark is her infectious enthusiasm for exploring all the possibilities of flesh and tech, tempered by healthy critique. Beyond that, what intrigues me is the tension her work holds between beauty and the uncanny. Her work gives me hope that we can love things that turn out to be not what was expected, a feeling most trans people know well.

—*McKenzie Wark*



Cyber-Teratology Operation, 2024.

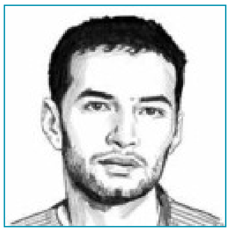


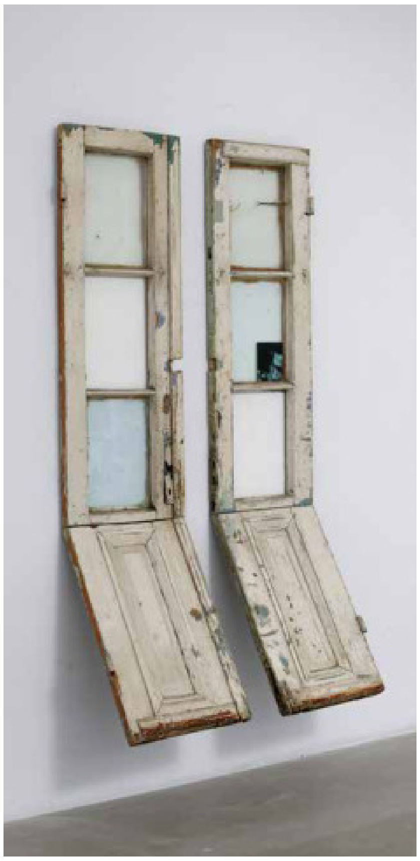
TRANSGENESIS, 2021.

From top: Photos VL9 Photography/©NERO (2); Photo Menhir Studio; Photo Henri Kisielewski/Courtesy Harlesden High Street, London

RAFIK GREISS

Photographs that feel like flashes in a dreamscape.





Rafik Greiss: *Lèvres Froides (Die Selektion Cover)*, 2024.

▶ **"I found it on Google!" Dublin-born Egyptian artist Rafik Greiss** cheerfully explains when I compliment La Maison, the café where we chose to meet in Paris's chic 17th arrondissement. At an intersection of our winter Mondays, Greiss on the way to his storage unit, me heading to a faculty meeting, the café offers an alternative for a studio visit when you're "between studios"—though immersion in public space is a signature of the artist's practice. "I produce a lot of my work outside the studio, and I realized I use it mostly for storage. Do I even want a studio again?"

Last year, as Greiss prepared for a solo show at Galerie Balice Hertling in Paris, "The Longest Sleep," he shared a space with painter Pol Taburet at the international artist residency POUSH. "I like to bounce ideas with other artists and it's nice to have a community," Greiss explains. Yet his work transmits an aching loneliness: photographs of string drawn around the wooden frame of an upright piano, a spare selection of found objects that read as relics of a nocturnal pilgrimage.

Slow, ambient sound rose from the basement, emitted by Greiss's new film, which he realized over the span of many nights spent with walis, or Sufi saints. He made the 12-minute film, *The Longest Sleep* (2024), last year in Cairo. Its slow-motion shots of a deserted merry-go-round and series of mawlids, trance-inducing Sufi rituals celebrating the birthdays of walis, remind me of scenes from James Baldwin's threshing floor. But Greiss references Andrew Newberg's neurotheology: "the study of how the brain functions on religion." Greiss did not grow up in a religious household, but was "always interested in the way the mind of a religious person works. I feel like all religions are about confronting this fear of death."

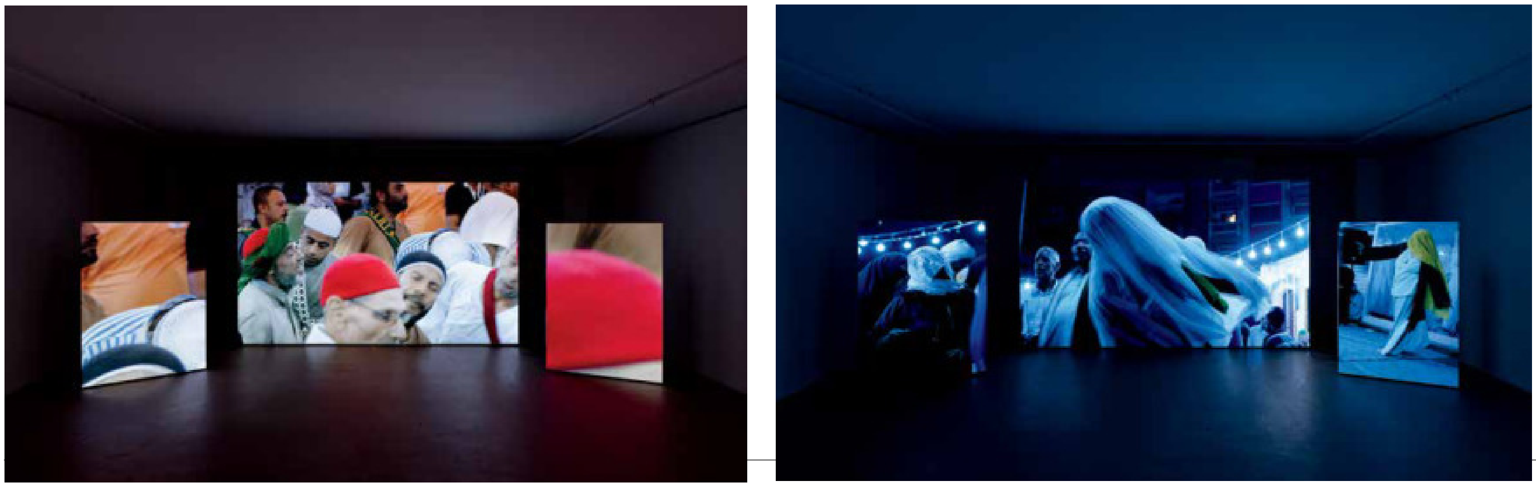
When the waiter places Greiss's tea on our table (lemon verbena, good for insomnia), he turns the 15-inch screen of his 2016 MacBook Pro toward me ("This is my studio now!"), sharing images of recent work. There's *Lèvres Froides (Die Selektion Cover)*, 2024, the pair of slender doors he shipped back from a residency in Tbilisi. They bear dusty footprints like ghosts on a threshold; at Balice Hertling, he hung them on the wall.

Greiss prints his black-and-white photographs. He shoots low and at a distance, his images like flashes in a dreamscape. His uses thick Japanese paper, and points out their textured edges—a way to emphasize artistic signature in a lens-based practice. Void of identifying details of place or person, Greiss's visions of crumbling urban architecture, decaying interiors, and a lone figure, blurred in a run, form a portrait of his feral, roaming eye.

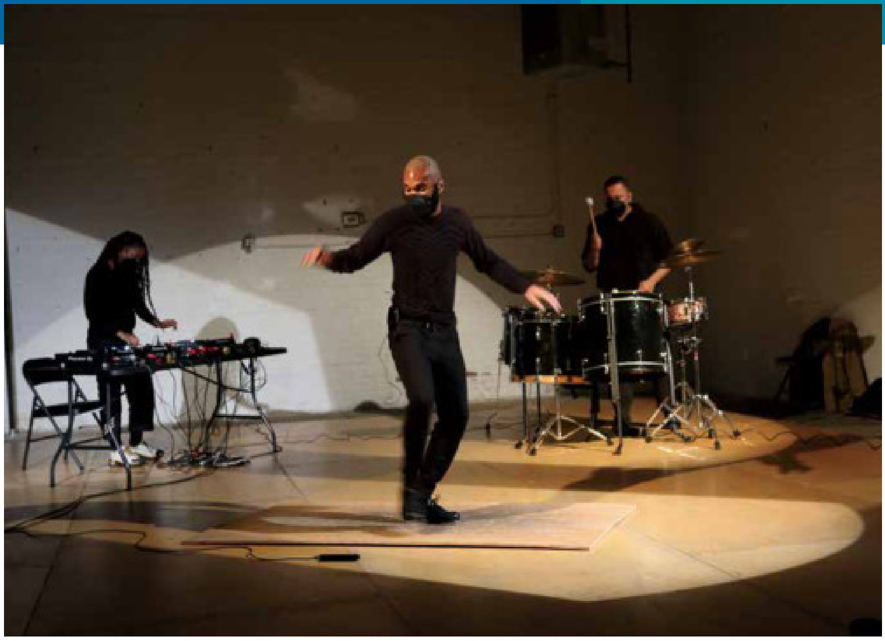
Currently fielding invitations for exhibitions at institutions around the Mediterranean basin, Greiss plots his next move. "As soon as I sell the work from my last show, I'll travel. I make so much work while I travel because everything's so new to me, different stimulus entering my brain." When I email him a week later to ask if he's decided on a destination, his answer is Egypt. "There, the connection with urban space is very raw."

—*Lillian Davies*

Two views of Greiss's installation *The Longest Sleep*, 2024, at Balice Hertling, Paris.



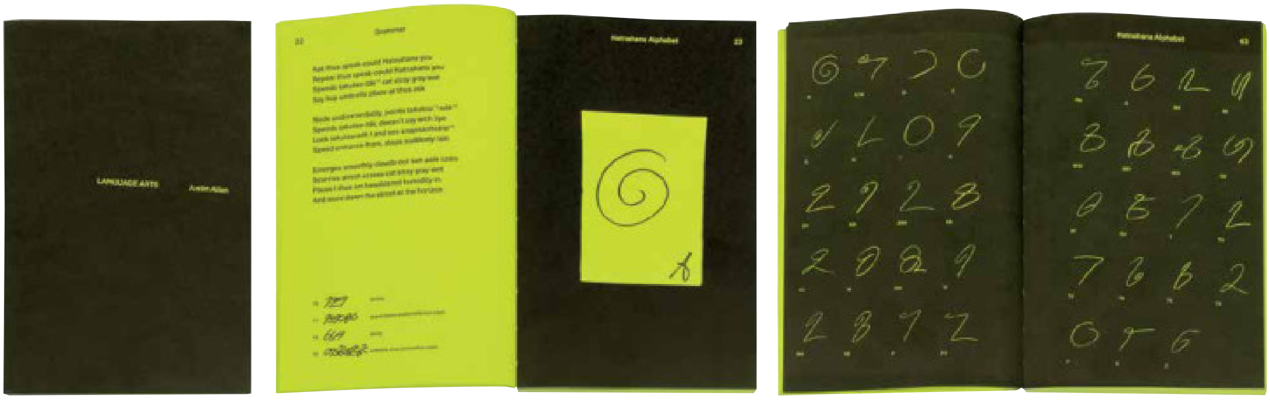
From top: Photo Aurélien Mole/Courtesy Balice Hertling, Paris; Photos Marjorie Brunet Plaza/Courtesy Balice Hertling, Paris (2)



View of Justin Allen's performance *Frequency*, 2022, performed with Yulan Grant and Ian Andrew Askew at the Chocolate Factory Theater, New York.

JUSTIN ALLEN

A poet and performer invents his own language, alphabet and all.



The cover and two interior spreads from Allen's book *Language Arts* (Wendy's Subway, 2024).

On the eve of Justin Allen's live reading to celebrate his debut book, *Language Arts* (2024), published by Wendy's Subway, we gathered over tea at a boutique café on New York's Lower East Side. Just a few blocks away, at Performance Space, the writer, artist, and musician would soon recite his poem "140 BPM" – a sonic reenactment of nights spent at Bushwick's Bossa Nova Civic Club – in a deep, resonant bass, mirroring the frenetic energy of bodies moving to techno. *Language Arts* manages to capture that energy in a book, merging music, dance, performance, and language to capture the reverberations of sound off walls. All the while, he transforms thunderous lyrics into leftist critiques: "We don't get paid / until next Friday and / our rent is due / tomorrow."

Allen grew up in the suburbs of Northern Virginia, where he began performing after discovering tap and hip-hop dance in his adolescence, and having inherited his father's diverse music tastes, which spanned Parliament-Funkadelic to Green Day's *Dookie*. As a high schooler, he encountered experimental punk bands that pushed his musical boundaries, and found solace in the chaotic fever dreams of the Blood Brothers and in the loose expressive rhythms of Saetia, which draws on jazz.

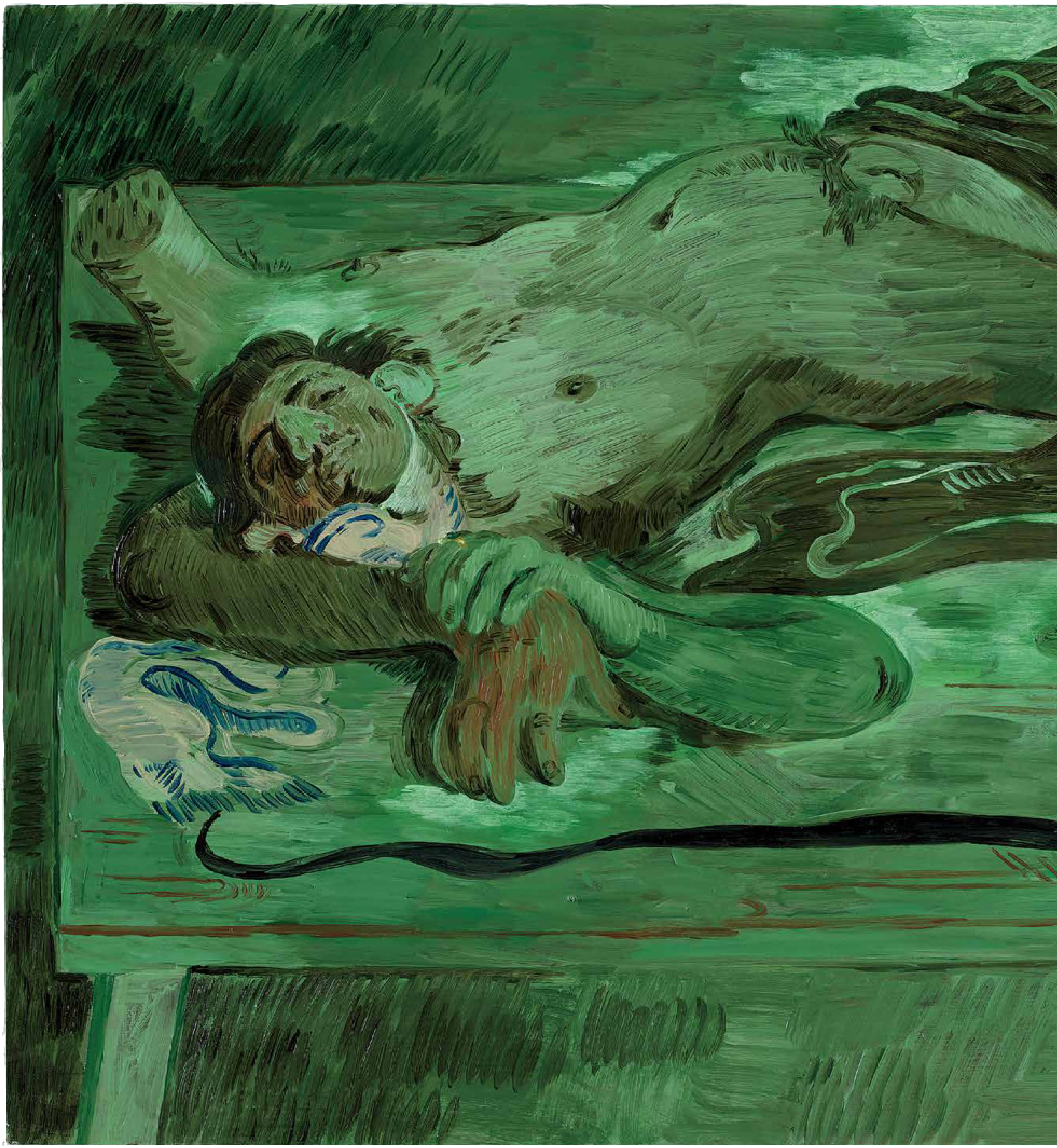
But it was Allen's move to Bush-era New York City that would shape his political consciousness. In the aftermath of 9/11, the artist was immersed in the world of indie sleaze artists like Santigold and M.I.A. He found in their music a framework for critiquing the United States. "It was a weird moment when everyone was scared for different reasons," he reflected. "Whenever people are scared, interesting things happen in culture." In *Language Arts*, these "interesting things" take the form of text filled with sci-fi-inspired scenes, speculative essays, and "Hatnahans" – a language Allen created himself.

Creating a language is no small feat, but for Allen, it was second nature. An aspirational polyglot – having tried his tongue at French and Spanish – he discovered David J. Peterson's *The Art of Language Invention* (2015) at the Strand bookstore near Union Square. After studying indigenous African languages like Zulu and Xhosa on YouTube, he began to craft a language of his own. Hatnahans has open vowels, genderless words, and an invented alphabet.

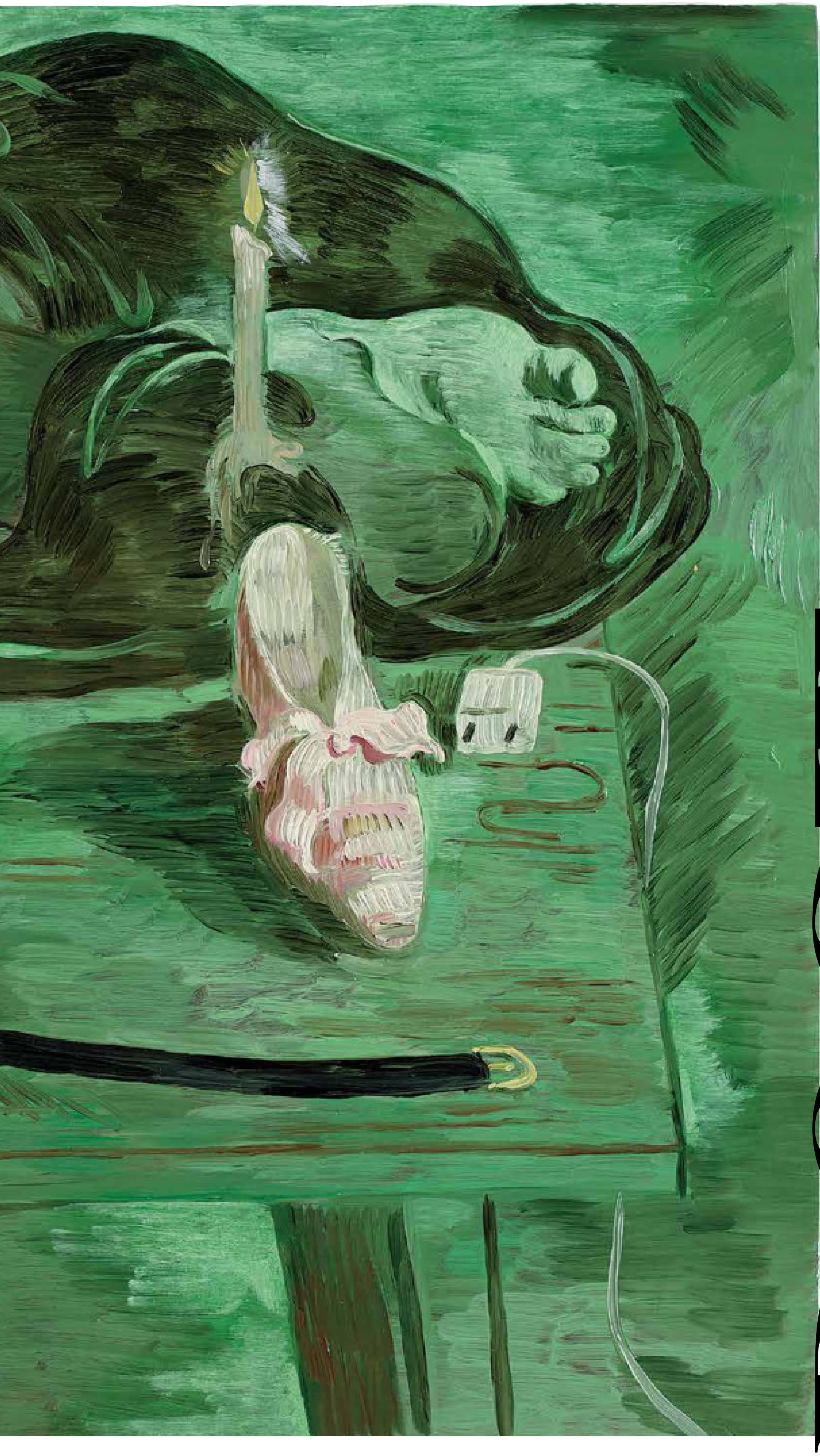
But the ethos of *Language Arts* is as punk as it is academic. Lyrics and notes from his band, Black Boots, are scattered across fluorescent green pages, infusing the work with the irreverence of club culture. In his opening essay, "Into the City," Allen presents a manifesto for the imaginary island of Hatnaha, blending urban life and nature in a vision of creative and ecological harmony. It conveys a sense of buoyancy, describing a luscious tropical climate surrounding a vibrant city center unspoiled by infrastructure issues and imperialism. Moving between these climes, at its core *Language Arts* creates a world as fluid as the languages we speak.

– Shameekia Shantel Johnson

From top: Photo Brian Rogers; Photos Justin Lubliner (3)



Salman Toor: *Fag Puddle with Handkerchief and Candle*, 2022.



POST MORTEM

On the recent boom in figurative painting

by Barry Schwabsky

There's a plausible story about the last half-century of art-making that would go something like this: By around 1950, almost all serious art was abstract. Soon enough, Pop art, Nouveau Réalisme, photorealism, and other tendencies might seem to have heralded a return of the image, but they did not: What they heralded was the return of the Duchampian readymade, sometimes in image form, though this too is a form of abstraction – an art of meta-images, if you will.

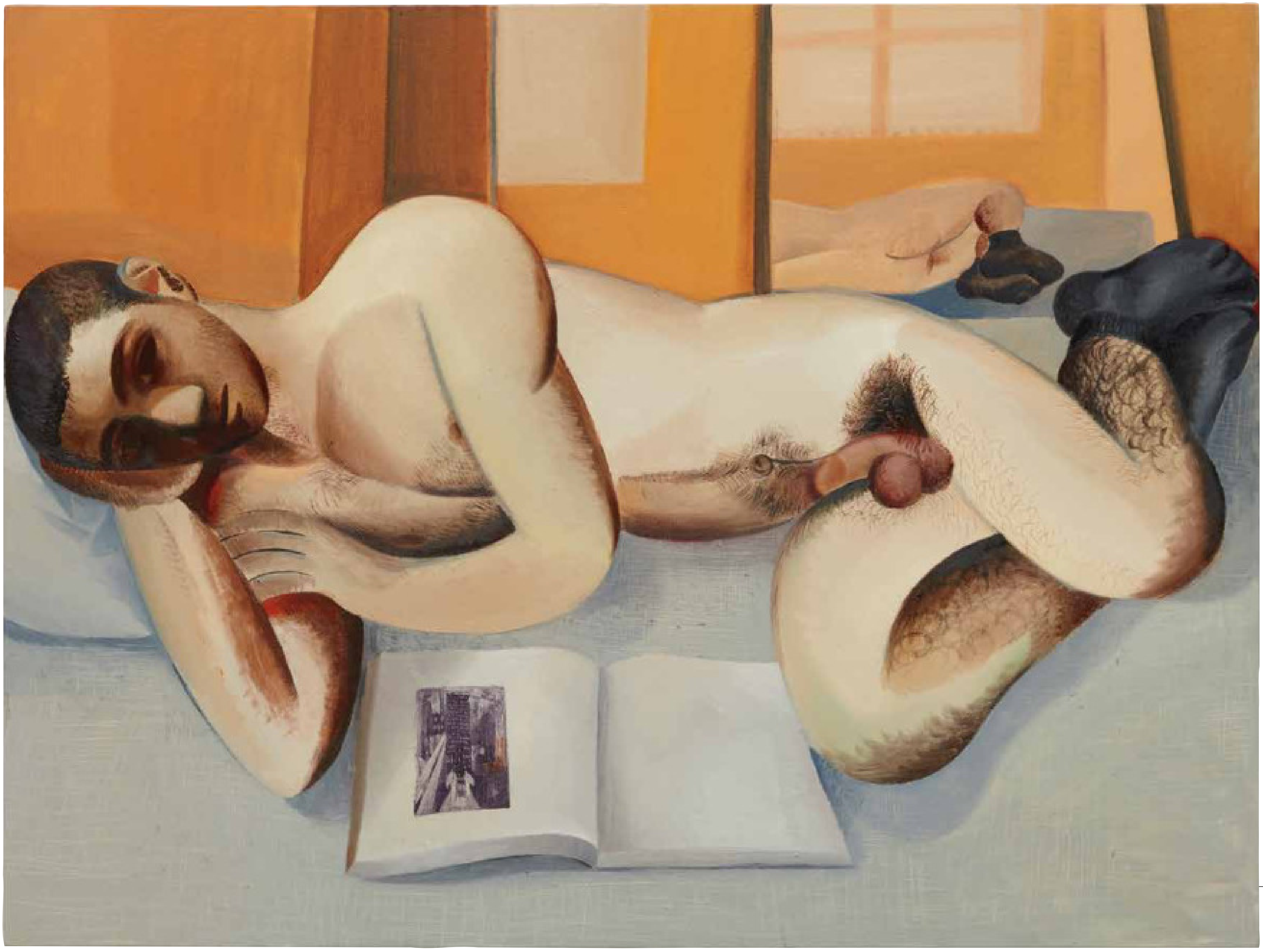
And then, the story continues, art began to grope its way back from this extremity: first with the New Image Painting of the 1970s and its pictographic signs in abstract fields; then with Neo-Expressionism, a painterly frenzy that scooped up the broken forms of the old pictorial modes, put them together haphazardly, then spewed them out again even more messily than it found them (think David Salle and Julian Schnabel). After that, for better or for worse – probably for worse – it was anything goes.

That kind of history offers the pleasure and utility of being utterly clear. The problem is that things were much messier. In 1952, when Jackson Pollock was painting *Blue Poles*, Edward Hopper was painting *Morning Sun*, and the following year, Francis Bacon painted the first of his screaming popes. In 1966 Mel Bochner mounted his pioneering Conceptual art exhibition, but was also writing in praise of Alice Neel's portraits. I could go on. But you get the point. Anyone who thinks that figurative painting died and made a comeback should remember that great old song by Dan Hicks & His Hot Licks: "How Can I Miss You When You Won't Go Away?"

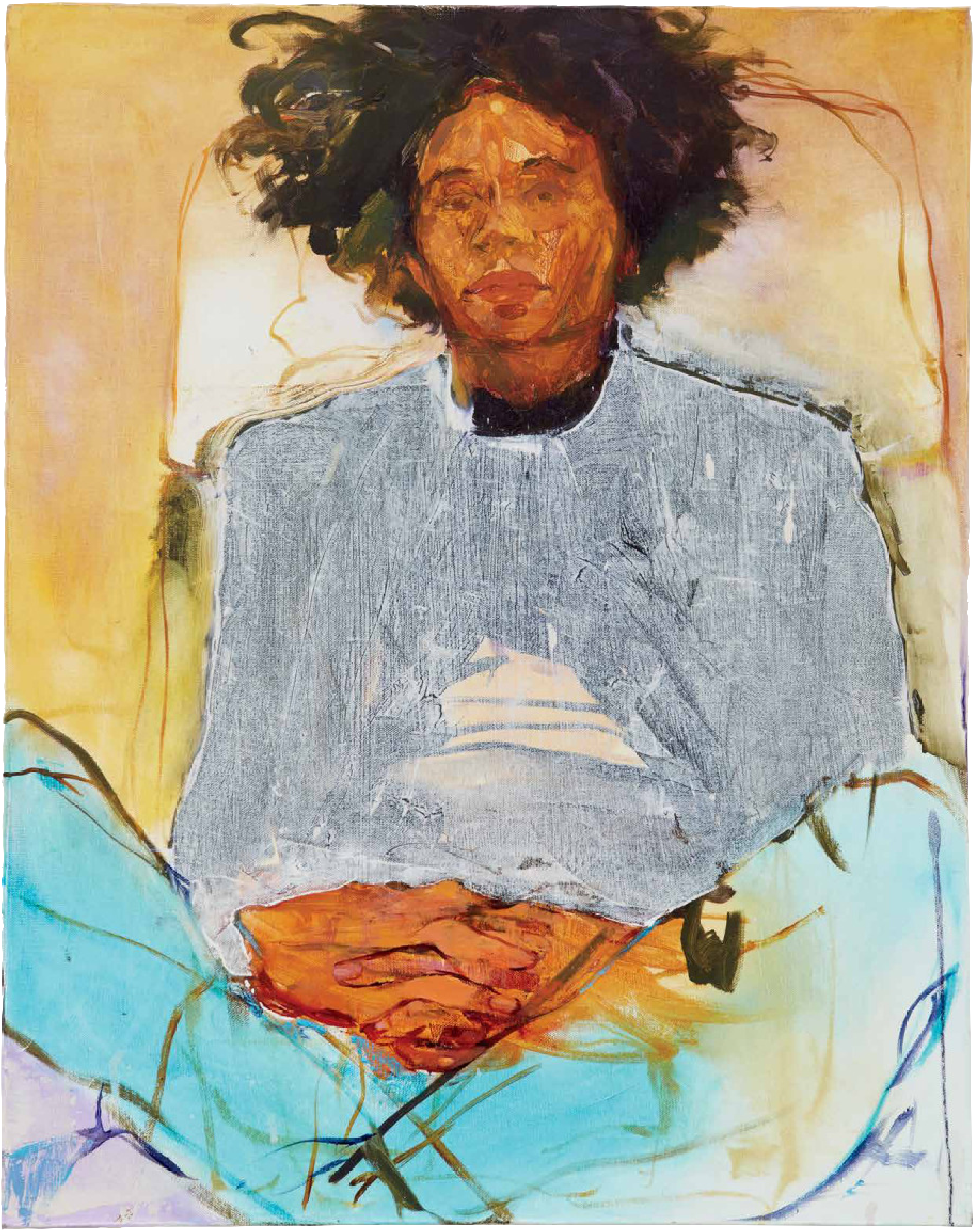
Figurative painting, of course, never went away, but sometimes it makes more noise, attracts more attention – in the market, and sometimes in the world of critics and curators. It will be remembered that about 15 years ago, collectors (and speculators) were hot on the trail of young artists making elegantly distressed quasi-minimalist paintings with a conceptual edge – as critic Walter Robinson admitted before almost single-handedly demolishing their market by coining for them the irresistibly derisive label of "zombie formalism."

With the 2014 defenestration of the zombies, a vacuum was created; needed to fill it was a new cohort of hot young artists whose works could be bought cheaply and resold quickly at a premium. Well, you can always depend on the pendulum effect. If abstraction has suddenly started to look dodgy, what about figuration? Lo and behold, a year and a half after Robinson's takedown, the same publication, *Artspace*, featured a story (by another writer) headlined, "The Figure Is Back, Baby! At MoMA PS1's Greater New York, Artists Vanquish Zombie Formalism with People Art," drawing attention to emerging painters such as Gina Beavers, Mira Dancy, Jamian Juliano-Villani, and Greg Parma Smith. That year's iteration of the quinquennial "Greater New York" exhibition featured, per the museum, "a heterogeneous range of aesthetic strategies, often emphatically

Louis Fratino: *Man, book, mirror*, 2020.

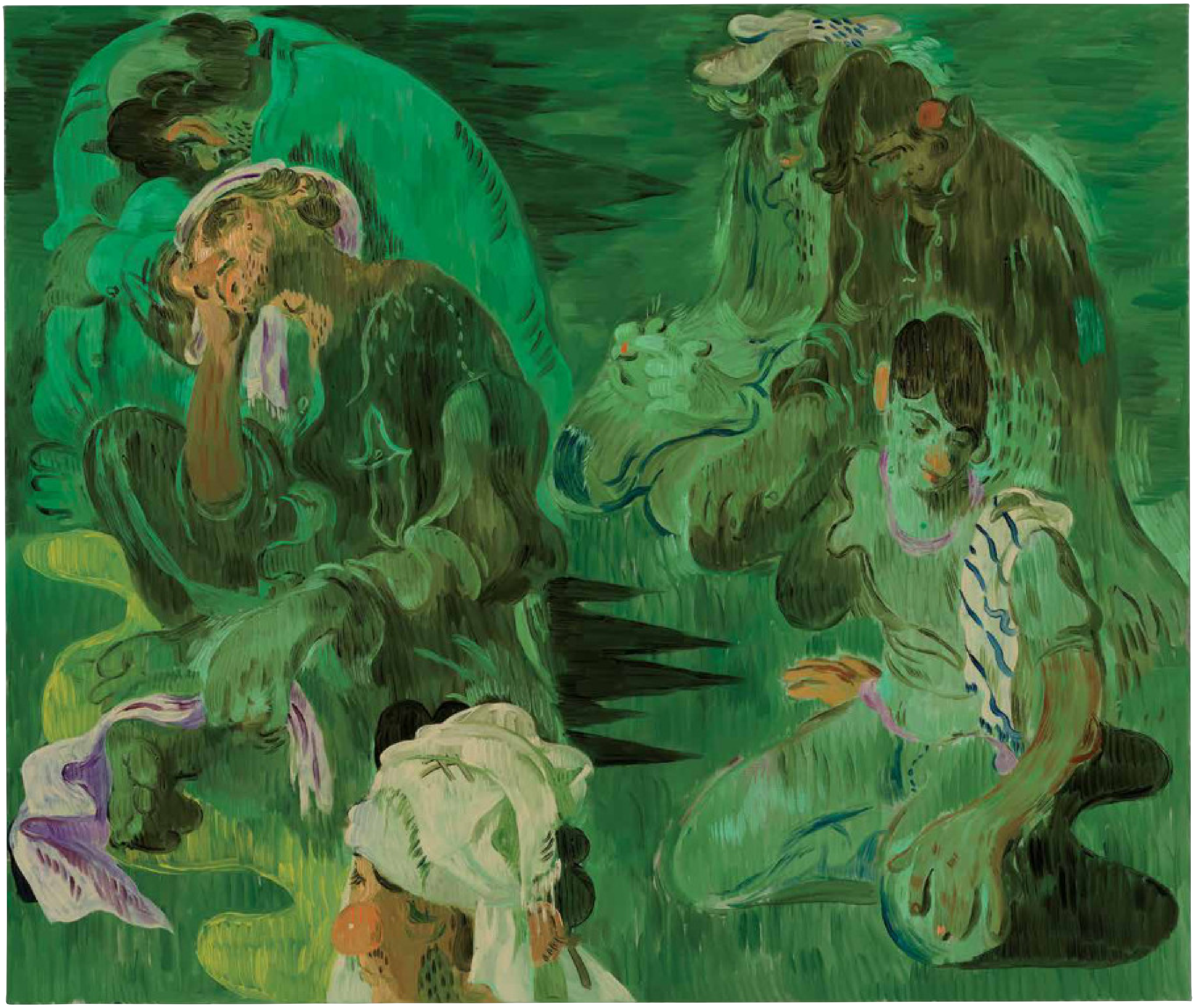


This page: Courtesy Sikkema Malloy Jenkins, New York/©Louis Fratino; Previous spread: Photo Farzad Owrang/Courtesy Luhring Augustine, New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London/©Salman Toor



Courtesy Sikkema Malloy Jenkins, New York, and Corvi-Mora, London/©Jennifer Packer

Jennifer Packer: *Jess*, 2018.



Salman Toor: *The Inheritors*, 2022.

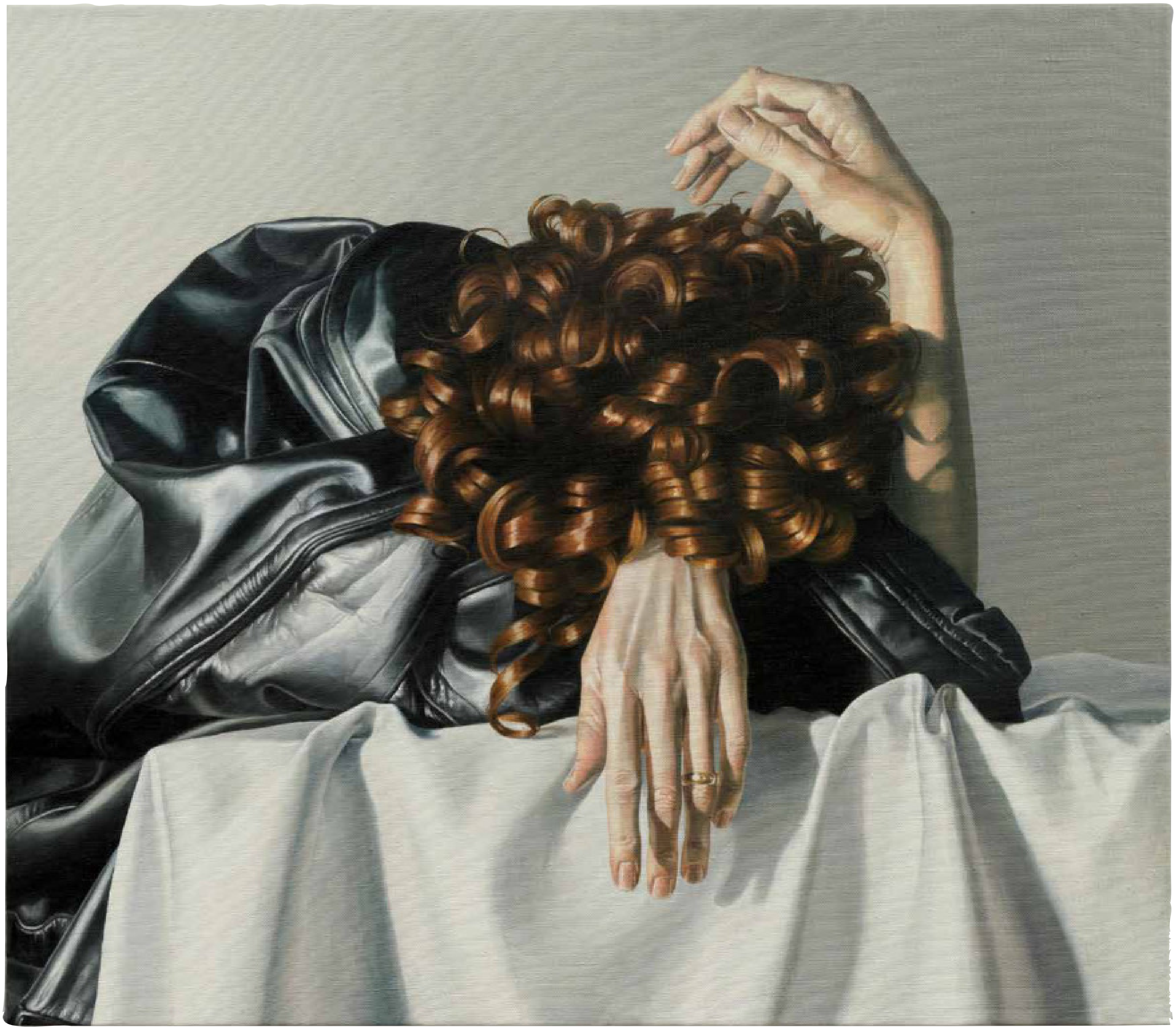
Photo Farzad Owrang/Courtesy Luhring Augustine, New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London/©Salman Toor

representing the city's inhabitants through forms of bold figuration."

If a figurative wave began circa 2015, it's held sway by now for a lot longer than the brief apotheosis of zombie formalism—presumably, at least in part, because recognizable images hold more appeal for viewers who are new to art. And coming during a period of market boom, it created some auction stars whose work also shows real substance, but also others whose success belies a fairly ordinary level of achievement, and did not last long. Yet another headline, this time from the August 2024 *New York Times*, spells it out: "Young Artists Rode a $712 Million Boom. Then Came the Bust." The headline didn't name what the illustrations make clear: All those whose auction prices shot up and then just as quickly plummeted were figurative painters. And what was striking to me when I read the article was that—although my work as both an art critic and an editor at an art magazine keeps me well informed about new artists on the scene—I had never seen or even read about the work of any of the artists featured. These were artists whose paintings had sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars without benefit of anything like a critical profile or a museum show. Their work had provoked no discussion, only speculation.

That fact shows something about the reception of figurative painting over the past decade: its indiscriminate nature. Collectors, dealers, and even curators (who ought to know better) seemed so eager to latch on to new figurative painters that they hardly seemed to notice whether the ones they chose were genuinely exploring what painting can be or just churning out B-student variations on figurative forebears such as Alice Neel or Kerry James Marshall. The figurative painting boom coincided with a market bubble, and not just for art: It was a period that finance commentator Mihir A. Desai described as when "magical thinking pervaded the wider investor class," a time of "declining and zero interest rates" when "mistakes and mediocrities were obscured or forgiven, while speculative assets with low probabilities of far-off success inflated in value." Yes, we know that market success does not equal aesthetic quality, but still, when weak and derivative work gets catapulted to dizzying price points, how surprised can one be when the fall is just as swift. One can be sympathetic to an artist whose work goes from selling at $100,000 to just $10,000 while still thinking they're lucky to sell it at all.

Now look again at that *Times* article on the collapse of the market for young artists. Just as the photographs rather than the text spelled out



Eunnam Hong: *Myth*, 2023.

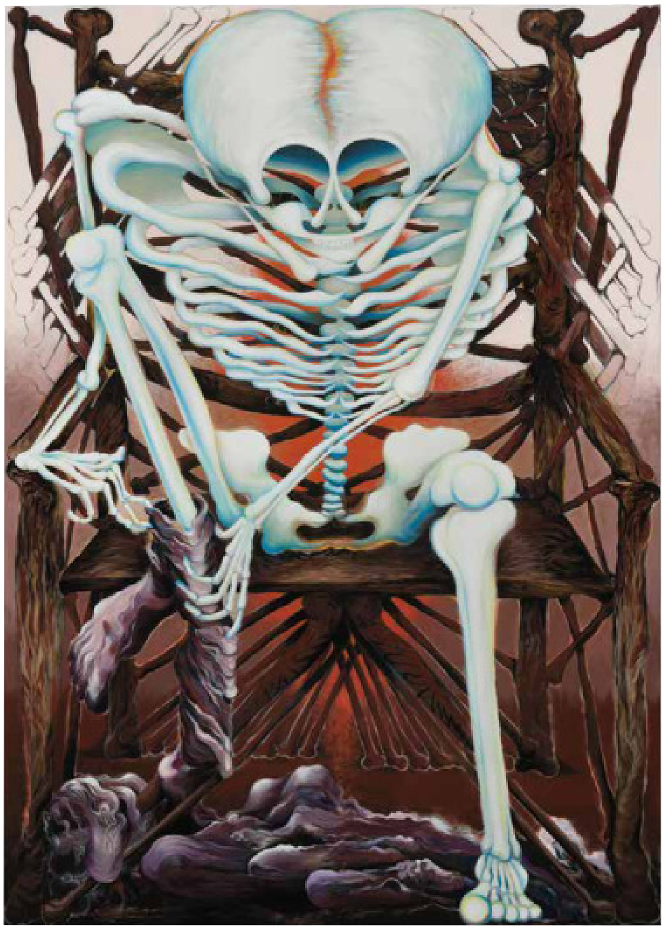
Courtesy Lubov, New York/©Eunnam Hong

that its beneficiaries-turned-victims were figurative painters, the same images made it clear that three of the four artists featured were Black. The boom in figurative painting coincided with a more general surge of interest in the work of Black artists that took off in tandem with the Black Lives Matter movement. But the effects were different in other areas of artistic activity: Black conceptual artists and abstract painters also suddenly became more visible than they had been for a long time. But in those fields, a similar speculative market in untried talent never seems to have taken off. Instead, elder or midcareer artists with oeuvres of proven substance, like Charles Gaines and Stanley Whitney, drew long-overdue attention.

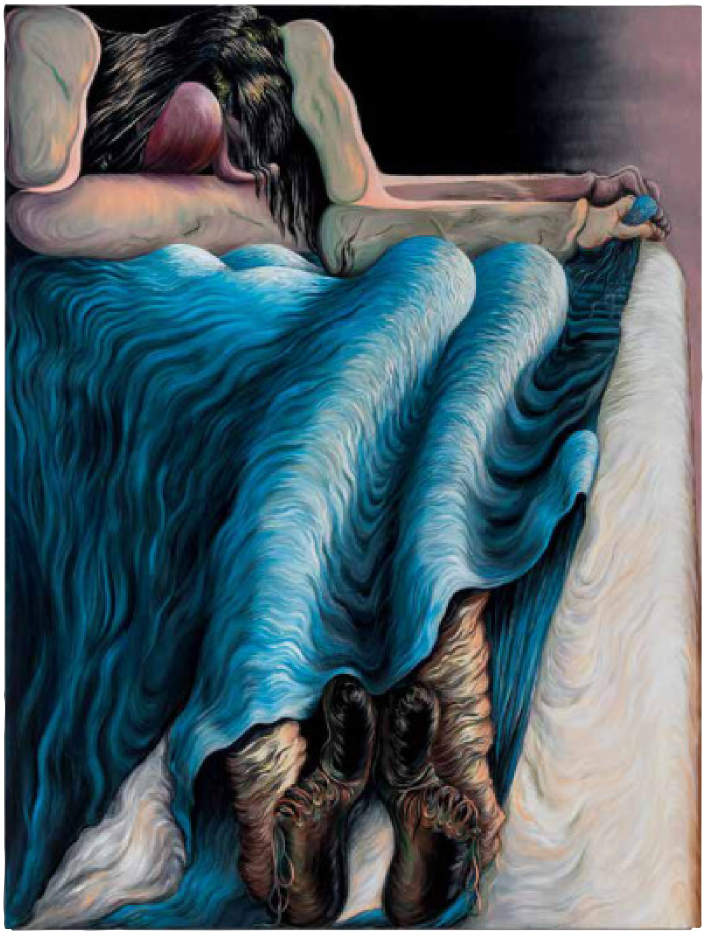
And of course there was good reason for the success of some of these new figurative painters too. The painterly intelligence of Jennifer Packer, for instance, is undeniable and poignant. The earthy brazenness of Somaya Critchlow's nudes can be haunting. But they are exceptions. Many of the younger painters who've been taken up by the market have opted for obviousness over nuance in meaning. And as critic Nkgopoleng Moloi recently pointed out, reviewing a survey of Black figurative painting at Zeitz MoCAA for this magazine, a widespread tendency to imitate Kerry James Marshall in exaggerating and de-naturalizing Black figures' skin color "risk[s] positioning the Black body as a gimmick." And the market, of course, loves a gimmick. So many younger artists seem indifferent to Marshall's declared goal: "to undermine that tendency to project a certain kind of image of who we are into the world." On the contrary, Blackness feels commodified in much of their work.

Where zombie formalism was derided as soulless, this new wave of figuration leaned sincere, propelled by earnest efforts to right historical exclusions. That means that not only paintings of Black figures but also other images reflecting marginalized identities have been given unprecedented market support. Queer artists in particular have come to the fore – Louis Fratino and Salman Toor, for instance – with work whose popular success is matched by artistic promise.

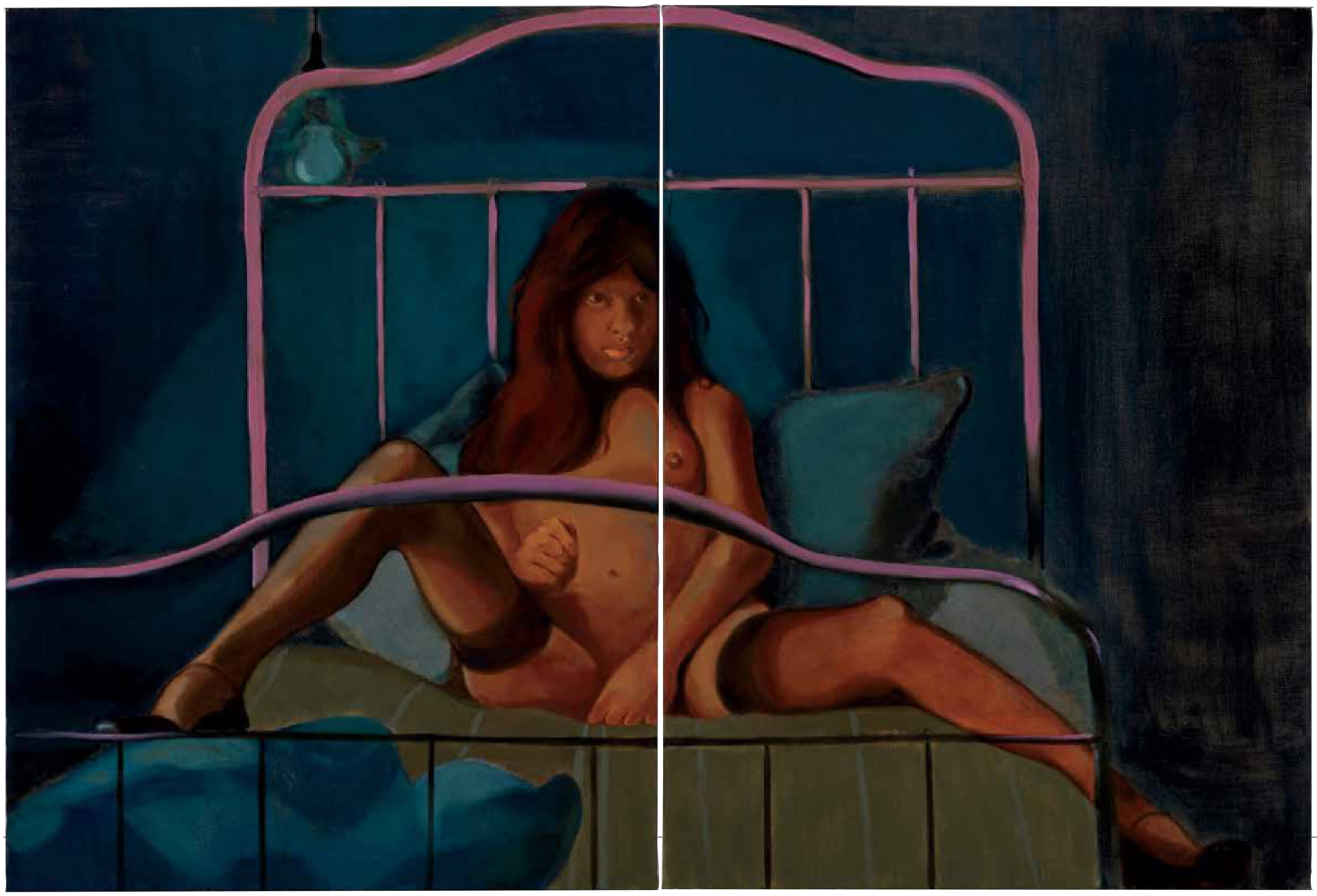
But after the January 20 inauguration of the second Trump administration, and the onslaught against DEI initiatives and what the federal Office of Management and Budget seriously calls "Marxist equity, transgenderism, and green new deal social engineering policies" in government, academia, and businesses – what's been called, and not hyperbolically, "the great resegregation" – one has to wonder what support the collector class, let alone publicly funded museums, will be



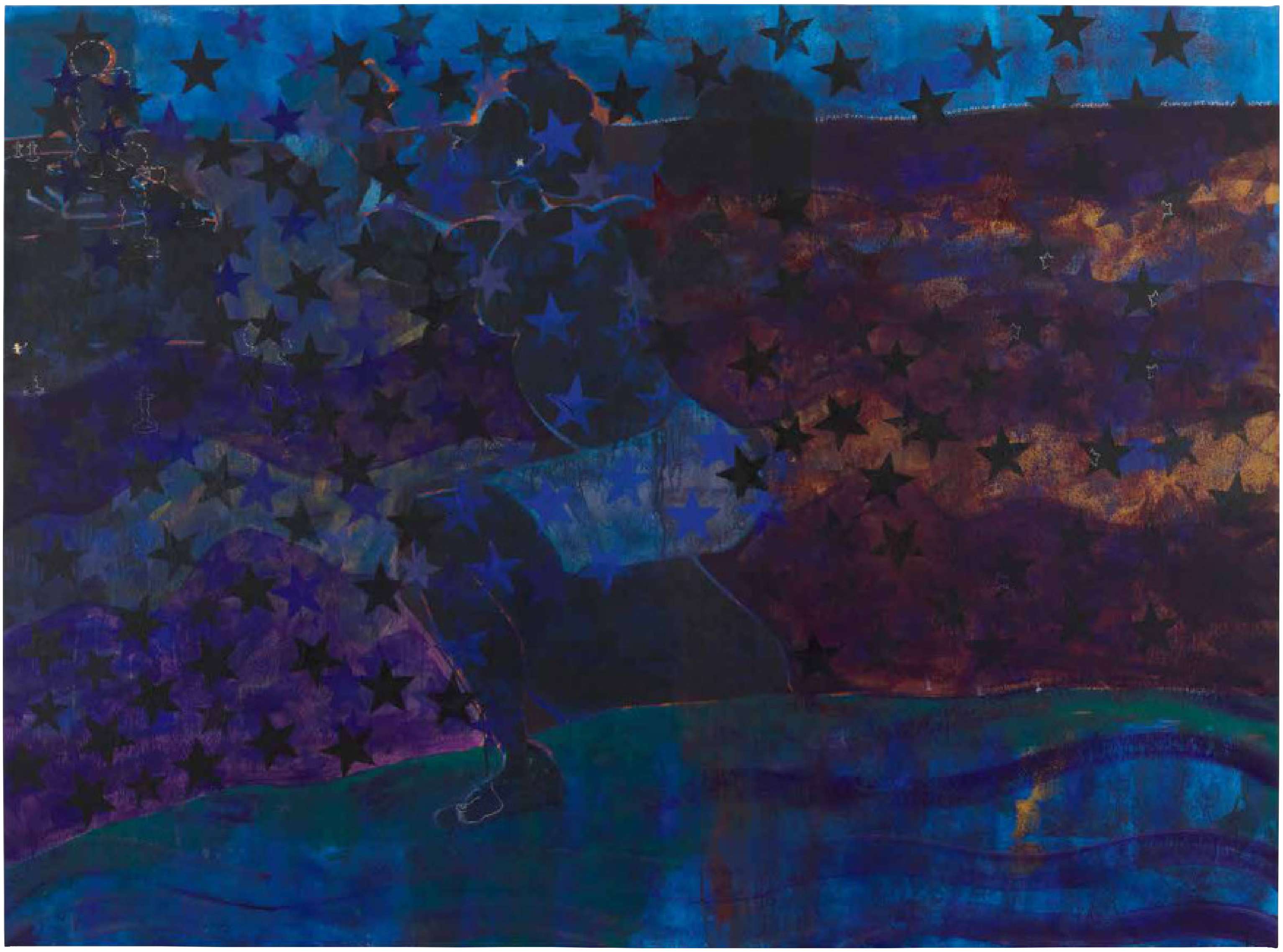
Bridget Mullen: *Androgynous Friendly Village*, 2023 (left), and *Animator's Gulch*, 2024 (right).



Somaya Critchlow: *Bedstead (Asymmetry)*, 2022.



From top: Courtesy Nazarian/Curcio, Los Angeles (2); Courtesy Maximillian William, London/©Somaya Critchlow



Walter Price: *Don't have hope, be hope!*, 2024.

Photo Elisabeth Bernstein/Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York

able to muster for Black and other marginalized artists. Collectors' desire to show their goodwill by displaying recognizable scenes of Black life on their walls could become a thing of the past, even among those who might want to send their Teslas to the used car lot.

So while market trends are always transitory in any case, it seems likely that the end of the figurative painting boom will be for exogenous reasons, to do with the unfavorable economic and political climate of the times.

But where does that leave the artists? In art, unlike politics, the burning question "what is to be done?" can sometimes entail ignoring the immediate context and forging ahead according to an inner directive rather than an executive one. I should probably add here that I dismiss out of hand Dean Kissick's view that art wokeism – not the term he uses but clearly what he means – "destroyed contemporary art." No artistic technique is in itself conservative or progressive; in art, the how always outweighs the what. Just as abstract and conceptual artists proceeded with their work notwithstanding the market drive toward figuration, in the coming decade we can expect that as some other craze takes hold, figurative painters may well cultivate their work in the shadows. They might even find that there are better rewards than getting rich off their work; I hope it doesn't sound corny and sentimental to say so. What Marcel Duchamp said so long ago could still be true: that the great artists of tomorrow could go underground. And an underground might be just what the coming years call for.

As for me, I've seen more than a few emerging painters making exploratory work using the figure and doing so with integrity – and more than that, making a mark on my memory that doesn't seem to fade. Here, I can just point to a few examples: One is Eunnam Hong, Korean-born and based in Brooklyn, whose enigmatic autofictional canvases, painted with incredible refinement, seem to go against the tide of much recent figuration by highlighting the plausible artifice, rather than the supposed authenticity, of identity. "I wanted to counterfeit an Asian-American woman character," she's said. Walter Price, by contrast, embeds his representational fragments in a context of lyrical abstract mark-making. But what the Georgia native, now living in New York, has in common with Hong, for all their stylistic differences, is a will to complicate things, to show seemingly self-evident stories as questionable, and to "make people more comfortable with being uncomfortable," using "visual contradictions to symbolize ideas for myself but also [to allow] viewers to have their own story with these objects." I could go on: Bridget Mullen's psychedelic grotesque, the eerie oil pastels of Michelle Uckotter with their "impossible quantification of solitary time"; Issy Wood's "medieval millennial" realism with its fragmented images like close-ups from an imaginary film noir ….

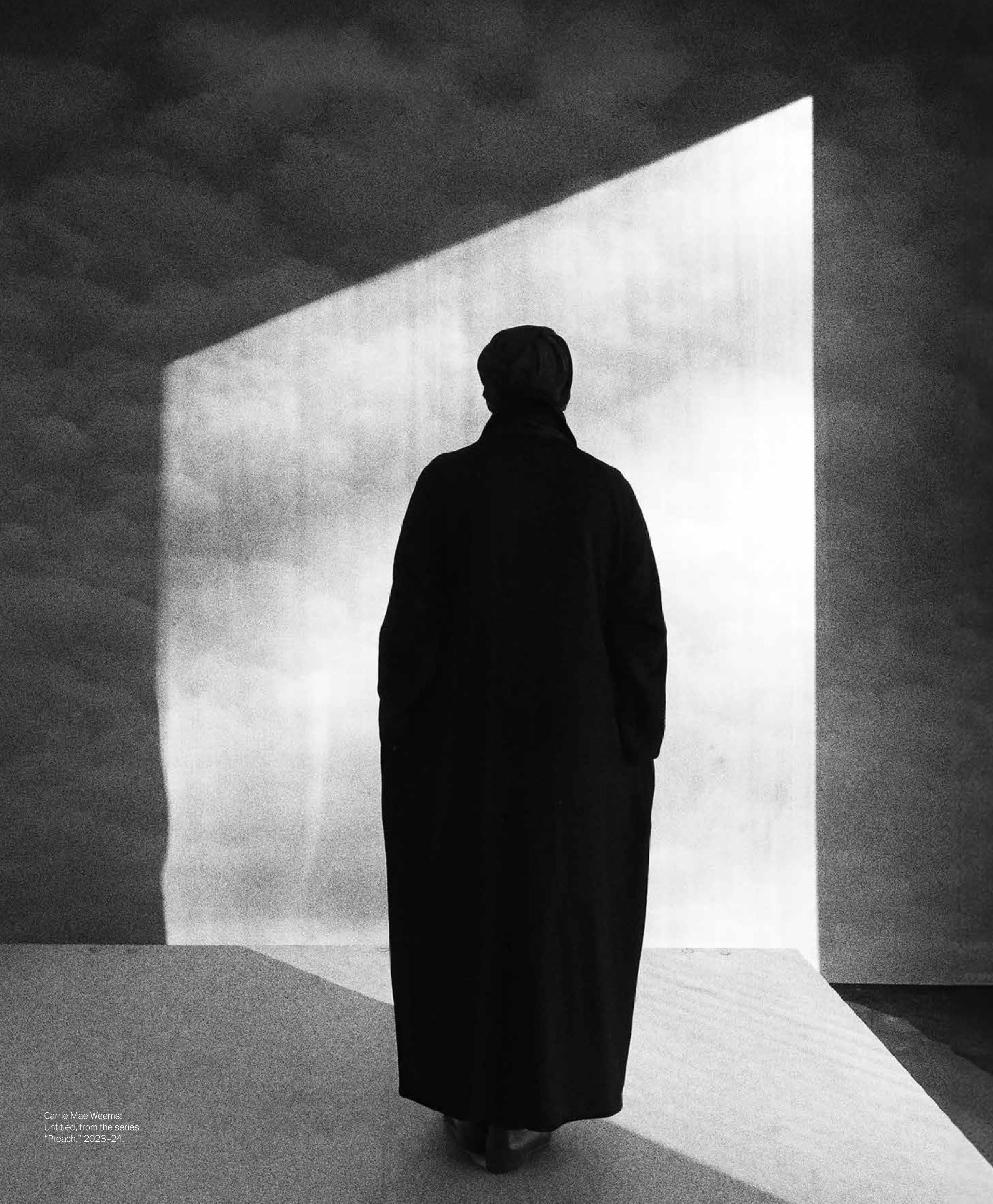
These five artists hardly constitute a trend. Their works don't look like each other's or anyone else's. And while they represent different ethnicities and gender expressions, their life experience informs their subject matter without coming off as packaged and sold. In the end, we may all be typical of our times, but some artists are typical in ways that no one else is: Those are the ones who stand a chance of being remembered. ●

THE SPIRITUAL TURN

In a world that feels increasingly inhospitable, spiritual art offers a salve.

by Eleanor Heartney

©Carrie Mae Weems/Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York, Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin



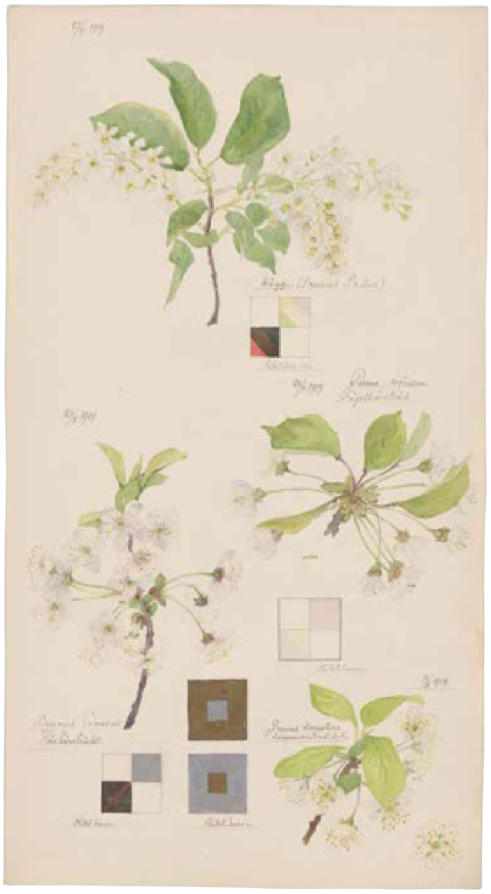
Carrie Mae Weems:
Untitled, from the series
"Preach," 2023–24.

What are we to make of the Hilma af Klint phenomenon? After decades of obscurity during which her works were stashed away in her nephew's storeroom, the visionary Swedish artist and mystic's 2018 Guggenheim retrospective broke all attendance records. In the show's aftermath, we have seen the emergence of a veritable af Klint industry issuing forth an unending stream of books, posters, T-shirts, mugs, exhibitions, even an opera. In just the last year, this once forgotten artist has been the subject of solo shows at Tokyo's National Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Tate Modern, and now, the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

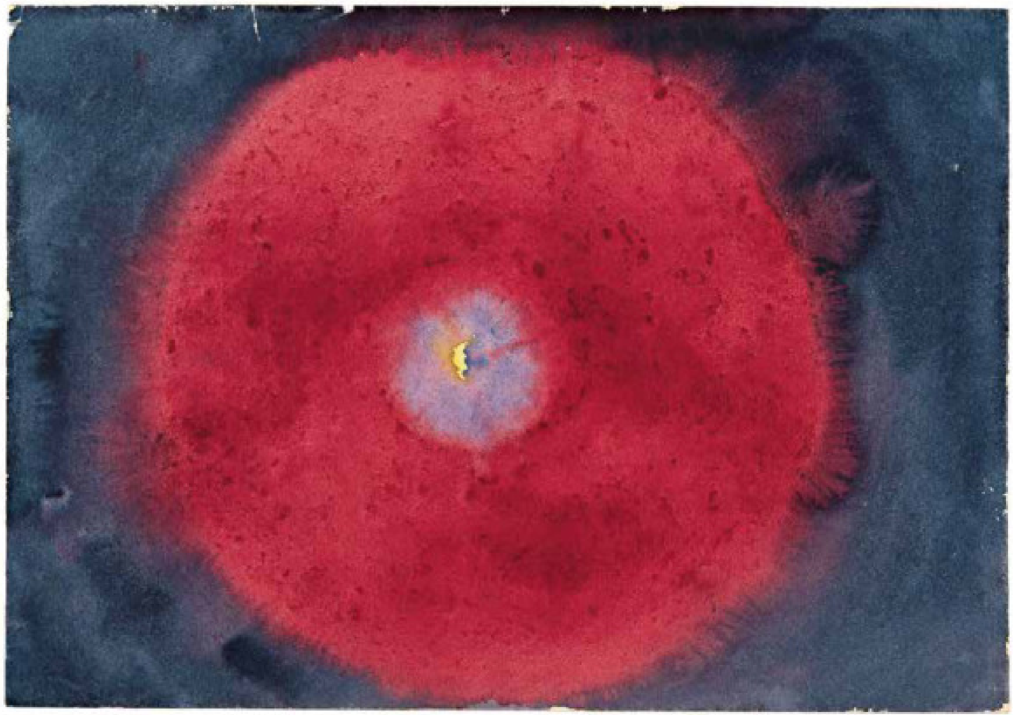
Jennifer Higgie offers a clue to af Klint's contemporary resonance in her 2023 book on women artists and the spirit world, *The Other Side*: "Quite apart from the sheer beauty of her paintings," Higgie writes, "it's hard not to see the near-feverish interest in [af Klint's] work as a reflection of the widespread hunger for new ways of inhabiting the planet."

Indeed, at the advent of the second quarter of the 21st century, a pileup of crises—social, political, environmental, and technological—seems to have all but extinguished the sense of optimism about the future that flared periodically throughout the 20th century. Af Klint's mysterious, luminous abstractions offer a salve to our jangled nerves. They also, as Higgie suggests, provide a stand-in for the values of feminism, environmentalism, collectivity, and spirituality that run counter to the current fixation on money, testosterone, and power.

Af Klint is just one manifestation of the art world's embrace of what we might describe as a spiritual turn, with the MoMA exhibition emphasizing her work's mystical side. The turn we are witnessing is wide-ranging, encompassing everything from an interest in esoteric rituals and the occult to the amplification of Indigenous, non-Western, and precolonial spiritual practices. It includes an embrace of the divine feminine and the framing of ecological concerns in terms of reverence for nature. What unites these disparate ideas is a resistance to materialism and a rejection of our heedless instrumentalization of all things earthly, from nature to culture.



Hilma af Klint: *Prunus padus (European Bird Cherry), Prunus avium (Sweet Cherry), Prunus cerasus (Sour Cherry), Prunus domestica (European Plum)*, from the portfolio "Nature Studies," 1919.

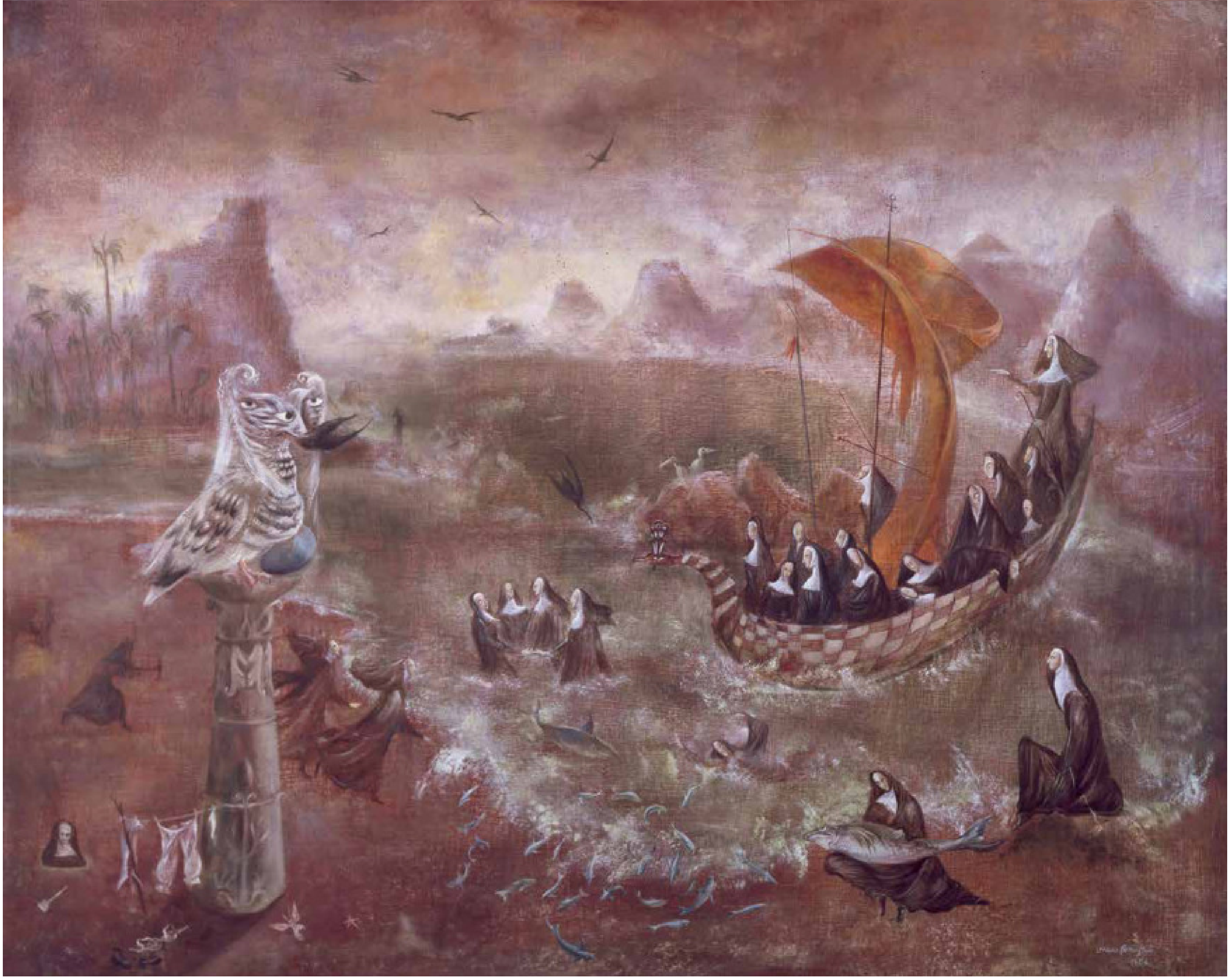


Af Klint: *Birch*, 1922.

From left: Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York; Courtesy Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm

The days when a whiff of religious belief or spiritual concerns would discredit an artist are long gone. Consider, for instance, the foregrounding of spirituality in the last two Venice Biennales. In 2022 Cecilia Alemani grounded "The Milk of Dreams" in the surrealism of Leonora Carrington, who became a fulcrum from which to explore myth, magic, spirituality, and "post-humanism," often from a very female point of view. Adriano Pedrosa's 2024 edition, "Foreigners Everywhere," focused on Indigenous and non-Western traditions that provide alternate visions of humanity's relationship with nature, the spirit world, and the cosmos. The current environment has also engendered a reconsideration of the influence of once marginalized religious traditions, among them the millenarian Christian Shaker movement whose aesthetic impact is the subject of two current shows, one at the Institute of Contemporary Art / Boston and the other at the Vitra Design Museum in Switzerland.

Another sign of the spiritual turn are the in-depth treatments at various major museums of spiritually inclined artists, most of them women. Among recent examples are María Magdalena Campos-Pons, who referenced Santería rituals and divinities in her 2023 retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum, and Amalia Mesa-Bains, who took over El Museo del Barrio with a series of altarlike installations that celebrated female saints and deities from Catholic, Aztec, and ancient Greek traditions. Currently at Gallerie d'Italia in Turin, Carrie Mae Weems's retrospective features a new installation titled *Preach* (2025), which explores the role of religion and spirituality among Afro-descendant Americans across the generations. Central to all three of these explorations is a



Leonora Carrington: *Nunscape at Manzanillo*, 1956.

©Leonora Carrington/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

dive back into spiritual traditions at odds with the secularized version of modernity that has shaped so much thinking about contemporary art – until now.

It is important to emphasize here that this spiritual turn is not really a turn among artists, who have long been champions of alternate realities and transcendent experiences. Prior to the 19th century, Western art and religion were deeply entwined. But this did not end with the arrival of Modernism: Charlene Spretnak's 2014 book, *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art*, unspools a persistent thread of spirituality running through Modern art from William Blake to the present. What we are seeing today is a turn by the institutional art world toward exhibitions that embody the search for a different set of values.

Why now? Times of upheaval have historically engendered a spiritual turn, and ours is no different. At present we are in the throes of mighty conflicts over gender roles and gender identity. Social media and AI are forcing us to reconsider the meaning of selfhood. We seem able to muster only feeble responses to the potentially world-ending ravages of climate change. Meanwhile, the populist rage that is upending long-established social and political norms has culminated in the return of a deeply polarizing leader. The political resistance that met Trump's first election is much more muted this time, the outcome perhaps of a sense of powerlessness. In these troubled times, frustration and exhaustion are leading many to search for ways to transcend the chaos. Perhaps not coincidentally, Trump's ascendence coincides with a reversal of the decades-long decline of religious groups in the United States.

We find precedents for our current turmoil in the 19th century. Then as now, the country was bitterly divided in a conflict that led in 1861 to civil war. Not unlike our own algorithmic revolution, startling new technologies like electricity, the steam engine, the telephone, and the telegraph were remaking daily life. Faith and science were at loggerheads as Darwin's theory of evolution undermined traditional religious beliefs. On the social front, labor struggles, racial strife, and the battle for women's rights ignited ugly political reactions.

Not coincidentally, the 19th century was also a golden age of spiritualism. This is a phenomenon explored in the exhibition "Conjuring the Spirit World: Art, Magic, and Mediums," currently on view at the Ringling museum in Sarasota, Florida. Curated by George H. Schwartz of the Peabody Essex Museum in Massachusetts, the traveling show presents a highly entertaining tour of the objects and practices employed by magicians and mediums to convince a credulous public of the possibility of communication with the dead.

From the mid-19th century through the early decades of the 20th, spiritualism – the belief in and practice of communication with the dead – captured the imagination of a large public. By 1880 there were an estimated eight million spiritualists in America and Europe. The show and its accompanying catalog focus on the mechanics and commodification of spiritualism as both a form of entertainment and a species of religious belief. The curatorial framework emphasizes the alternately symbiotic and antagonistic relationships between magicians

Times of upheaval have historically engendered a spiritual turn, and ours is no different.

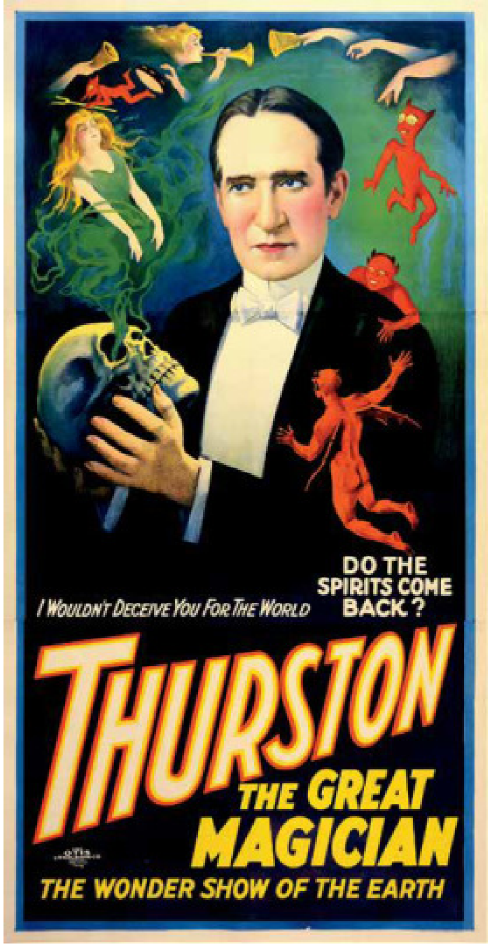
and mediums as they adapted each other's techniques while undermining each other's credibility.

The catalog details some of the reasons for the spiritualism craze, among them the comfort it offered a populace traumatized by war, its apparent alignment with science, and its convergence with the birth of modern advertising techniques. Only one essay touches on the artistic manifestations of spiritualism. Written by artist Tony Oursler, whose own work is indebted to spiritualism and who is an avid collector of the movement's ephemera, it discusses the spirit-guided painter Ethel Le Rossignol. Her kaleidoscopic figurative paintings were created in collaboration with a deceased friend known only as J.P.F.

The massive catalog for "Supernatural America: The Paranormal in American Art," an exhibition organized by the Minneapolis Institute of Art in 2022, contains a deeper dive into the philosophical underpinnings, historical significance, and artistic repercussions of spiritualism. Curator Robert Cozzolino follows the spiritualist thread from its birth in the traumas of the 19th century to its present-day influence on artists as diverse as Oursler, Howardena Pindell, Carolee Schneemann, and Bill Viola. Cozzolino remarks that "to remember is to confront ghosts, to ask what they want, to make amends, and to learn to live with them," adding, "artists assert these ideas and often willingly court otherworldly contact as a way to move forward."

AVA MUNTELL
THE WOMAN WITH A
MILLION EYES.

Ava Muntell: *The Woman with a Million Eyes*, ca. early 20th century.


DO THE SPIRITS COME BACK?
I WOULDN'T DECEIVE YOU FOR THE WORLD
THURSTON
THE GREAT MAGICIAN
THE WONDER SHOW OF THE EARTH

A lithograph promoting stage magician Howard Thurston's magic show, 1929.

If the 19th century is one touchstone for our current unrest, the period between the two World Wars offers another. A series of shocks, among them the carnage of World War I, the cataclysm of the Great Depression, and the rise of Fascism, galvanized the artists associated with the Surrealist movement. They reacted to the failures of individualism, capitalism, and nationalism with an embrace of fantasy and dreams. Although many of the artists were involved in revolutionary politics, their real mission was a revolution of the spirit. They believed change would emerge from within, as a product of the expanded consciousness that comes from relinquishing the hold of reason.

Once considered an aesthetic backwater, Surrealism has, in our equally troubled times, become intensely popular, with particular focus directed toward women Surrealists—several of whom embraced personas as magical being, goddess, and witch. "Surrealism and Magic: Enchanted Modernity," on view at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice in 2022, stressed the occult interests of Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini, Dorothea Tanning, Maya Deren, Kay Sage, and Remedios Varo. The Pompidou Center's traveling "Imagine! 100 Years of International Surrealism" is the latest in a string of Surrealist blockbusters; it opens in June at the Hamburger Kunsthalle before traveling to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

John Beattie: *Abstract manifestations*, 1872.

Individual artists are also getting deeper looks, with Maruja Mallo's retrospective on view now at Centro Botín in Spain, and Leonora Carrington becoming almost as much a cottage industry as af Klint. "Leonora Carrington: Dream Weaver," currently at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, draws from her productive midcentury period, and features some of her less familiar paintings—works illuminating the truly spooky nature of her inner world. They are filled with strange creatures and spectral human figures whose inner light seems on the verge of dissolving into the surrounding shadows, borrowing from the Kabbalah, alchemy, Celtic myth, ancient Egyptian pictograms, and Druid magic, as well as a very personal vocabulary of symbols referencing metamorphosis and hybridity.

This spring also brought a lesser known but equally fascinating Surrealist-influenced artist into view. Ithell Colquhoun was included in the historical section of Cecilia Alemani's 2022 Venice Biennale, but she has until now received less attention than some of the other heroines of that show. This may be because she separated

Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass (3); Muntell and Beattie: Collection Tony Oursler

herself from her fellow Surrealists to settle in a remote area of Cornwall, England, home of ancient Celtic stone circles, Druidic rituals, and Arthurian legend.

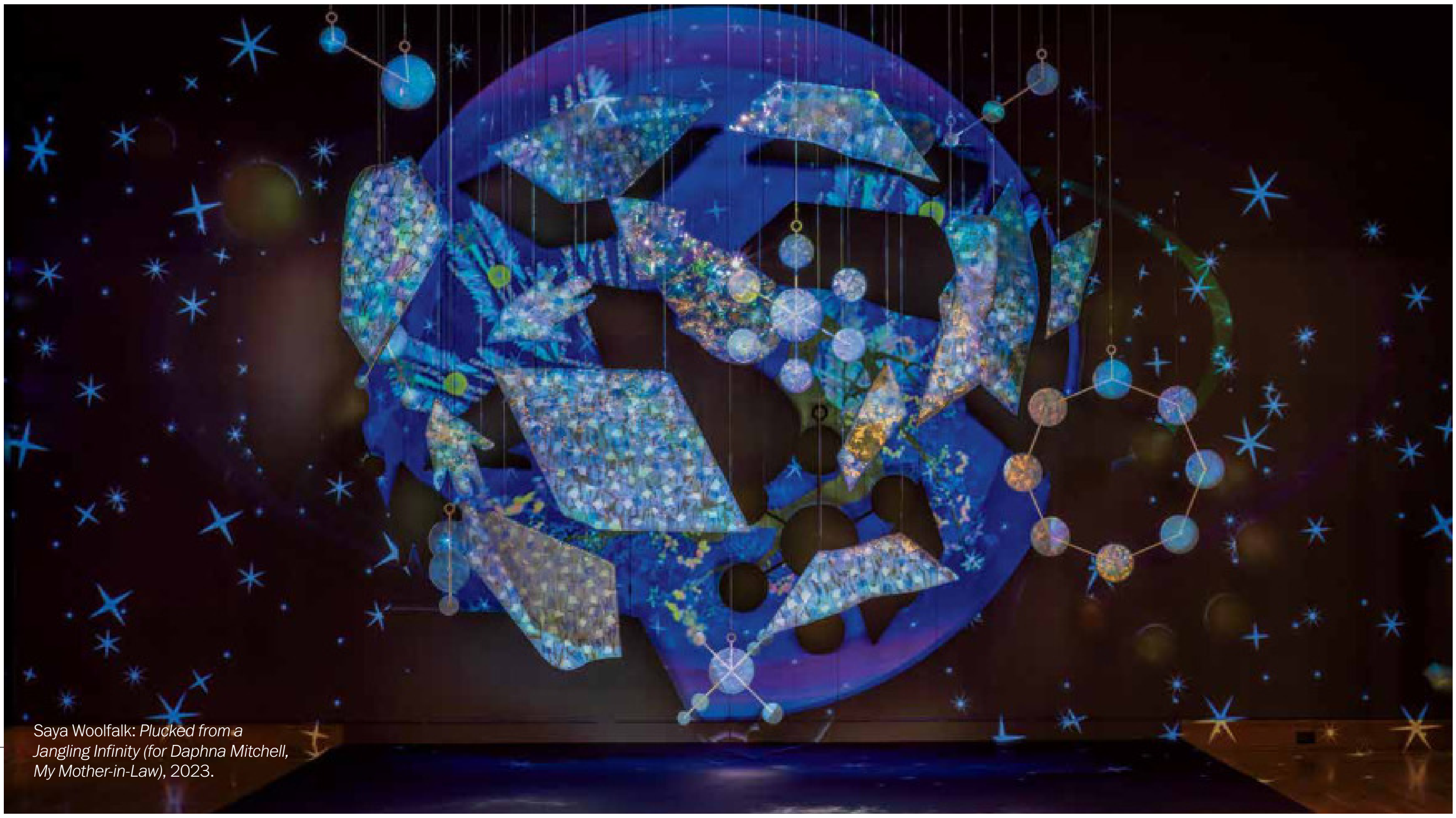
"Ithell Colquhoun: Between Worlds," a major retrospective of this visionary artist's work organized by Tate St. Ives and traveling to Tate Britain in June, should help rectify her obscurity. Not just a painter, she was also a scholar and writer whose work traverses Jewish Kabbalah, Christian mysticism, Egyptian mythology, and Hindu Tantra. Born in India and raised in southwest England, Colquhoun displayed an interest in alchemy and the occult early on. During her time at the Slade School of Fine Art in London in the late 1920s, she became involved with various occultist organizations, and with members of the British and French Surrealist movements. By the time she moved to Cornwall, she was infusing Surrealist automatism with her knowledge of various esoteric traditions. Colquhoun's resulting work ranges from early Daliesque tableaux full of vaguely neoclassical figures and alchemically inspired spatial diagrams to nature-based abstractions and, finally, to a set of fully nonobjective Tarot cards.

Much current work in a spiritual vein moves beyond the 19th century's concern with communion with the dead and the Surrealists' preoccupation with unconscious knowledge to explore questions about our relationship to nature. We see this in the growing interest in Indigeneity, which often offers more holistic connections to the land, and in the feminist tinge in so much of today's spiritually inclined work. Women's metaphorical and historical identification with nature, once derided as essentialist, now offers a counter to the extractive and exploitative paradigm that pervades the industrial world.

Saya Woolfalk is one artist approaching nature's spiritual side. Her midcareer retrospective currently fills two floors of New York's Museum of Arts and Design, and centers around a long-term project: the creation of an alternate reality that she titles the Empathic Universe. This world is at once trippy and mystical, a version of a futuristic utopia that envelops viewers in a sensory overload of light, color, and sound. The part-human, part-plant beings that populate it have been transformed by an ambiguous technology to assume an empathic consciousness attuned to the rhythms and processes of nature. Like af Klint, Carrington, and Colquhoun, Woolfalk deploys her art to create portals into another world that is rife with animism, hybridity, and the promise of connection with spirits and energies beyond ordinary human perception. She says, "I want audience members to experience the exhibition space as a cosmological space. Someplace where they can reimagine their bodies' relationships to nature."

Which brings us back to af Klint. The Guggenheim's 2018 exhibition helped fan the institutional art world's enthusiasm for spiritually inclined work with an emphasis on the artist's role as a conduit for the voices of her spiritual guides. "Hilma af Klint: What Stands Behind Flowers," currently at the Museum of Modern Art, brings a different aspect of the artist's work into view. It centers on af Klint's "Nature Studies," a portfolio of 46 botanical drawings that she created in 1919 and 1920 after she had distanced herself from her spiritual guides. In some ways, these were a return to the botanical and zoological illustrations she had created for various scientific encyclopedias as an income source while she pursued her esoteric work. But for "Nature Studies," she merged her scientific and spiritual concerns, incorporating geometric diagrams that situated these precisely drawn plants into otherwise invisible energy and spiritual fields.

The foregrounding of nature in these works provides another perspective on the af Klint story. Dubbing her work "mystical empiricism," art historian Daniel Birnbaum remarks, "her version of abstraction is compatible with the processes of teeming nature rather than the precision of heavenly geometries." As such, it underscores the powerful connections between the spiritual forces that lure artists toward other dimensions and the vision of nature as a realm of vibrant energies and entwined relationships. Artists who explore this version of spirituality find it, not out there in an all-powerful creator or on some distant and disembodied astral plane, but closer to home in our own surroundings. For them, the spiritual turn is a turn toward this world, toward an earth that is alive, potentially sustaining, and deeply vulnerable. It is a sense of spirit that seems particularly attuned to our precarious times. ●

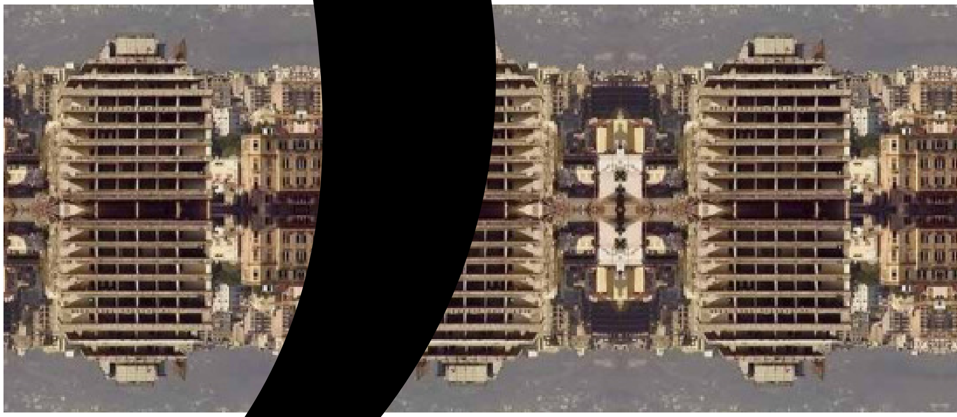


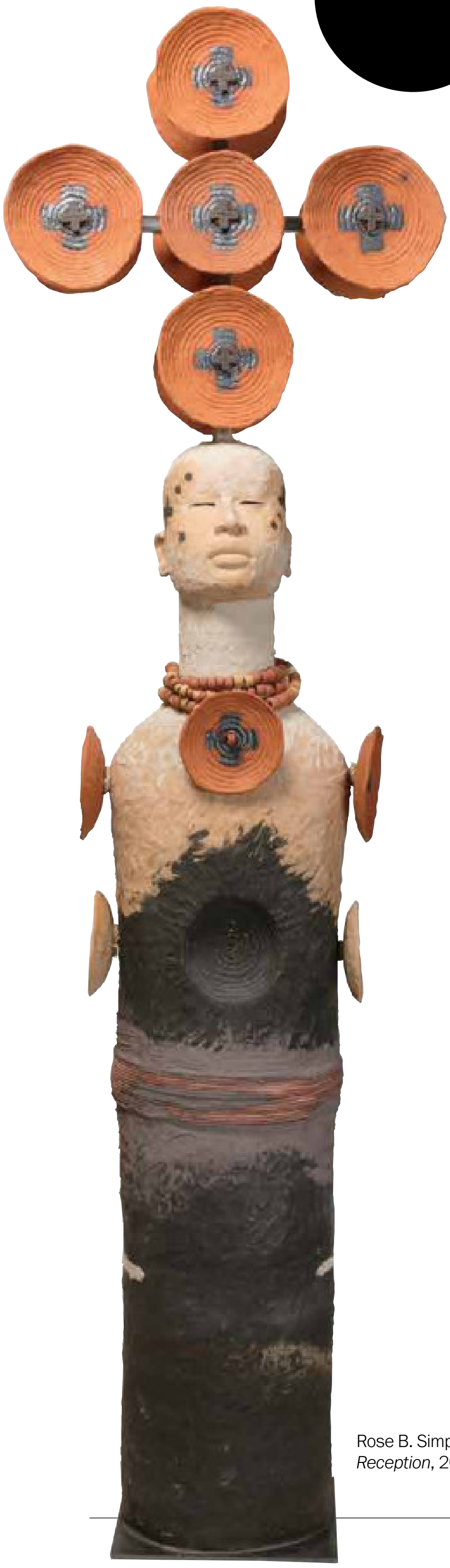
Saya Woolfalk: *Plucked from a Jangling Infinity (for Daphna Mitchell, My Mother-in-Law)*, 2023.

Courtesy Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire

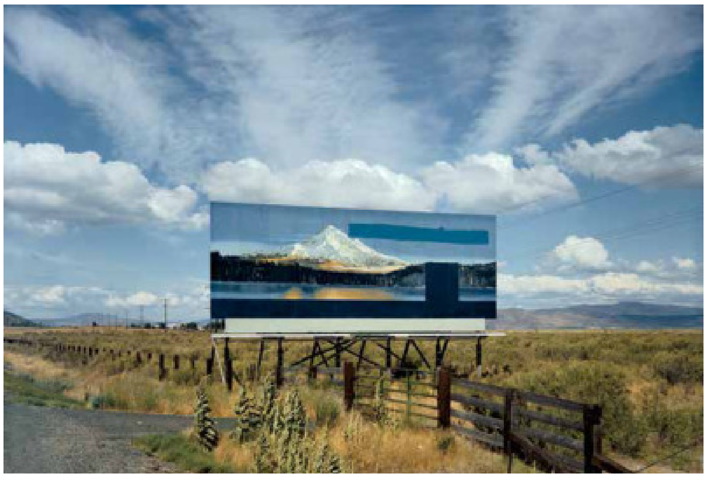
What Is Art Good For?

View of Andrew Norman Wilson's exhibition "Hirngespenster (Brain Ghosts)" at the Kunstverein Braunschweig, 2019.



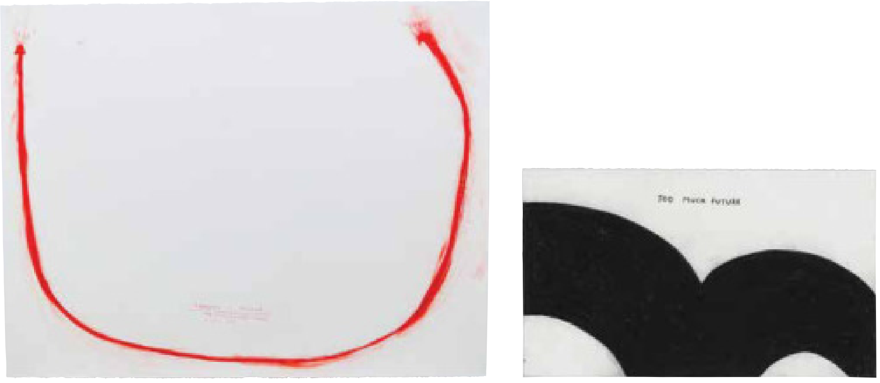


Rose B. Simpson: *Reception*, 2023.

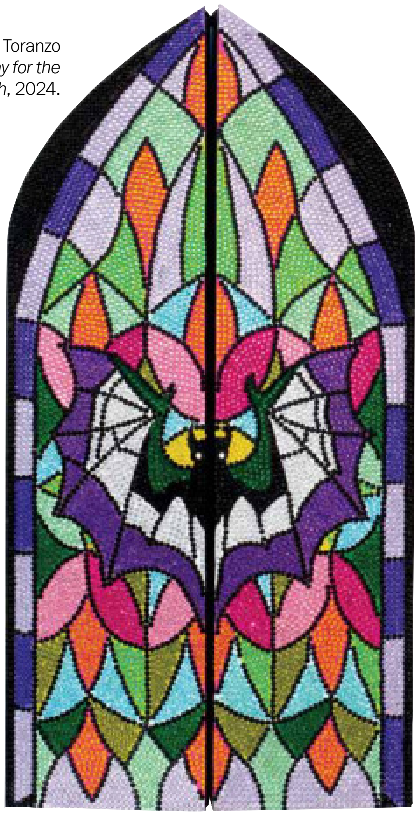


Stephen Shore: *South of Klamath Falls, U.S. 97, Oregon, July 21, 1973.*

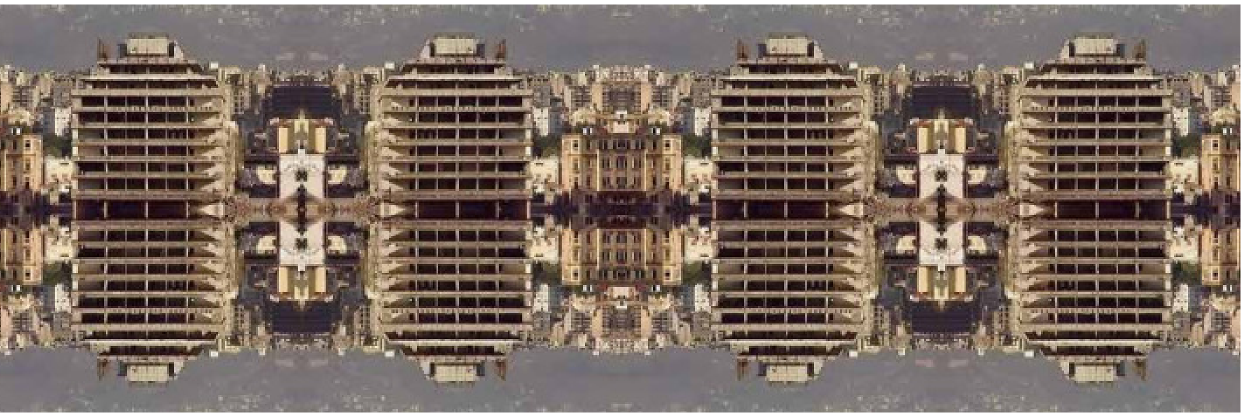
Simpson: Photo Addison Doty/Courtesy Jessica Silverman, San Francisco, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; Wilson: Courtesy Kunstverein Braunschweig; Shore: Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York/©Stephen Shore



Christine Sun Kim: *All. Night.*, 2012 (left), and *Too Much Future*, 2016 (right).



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger: *Horny for the end of earth*, 2024.

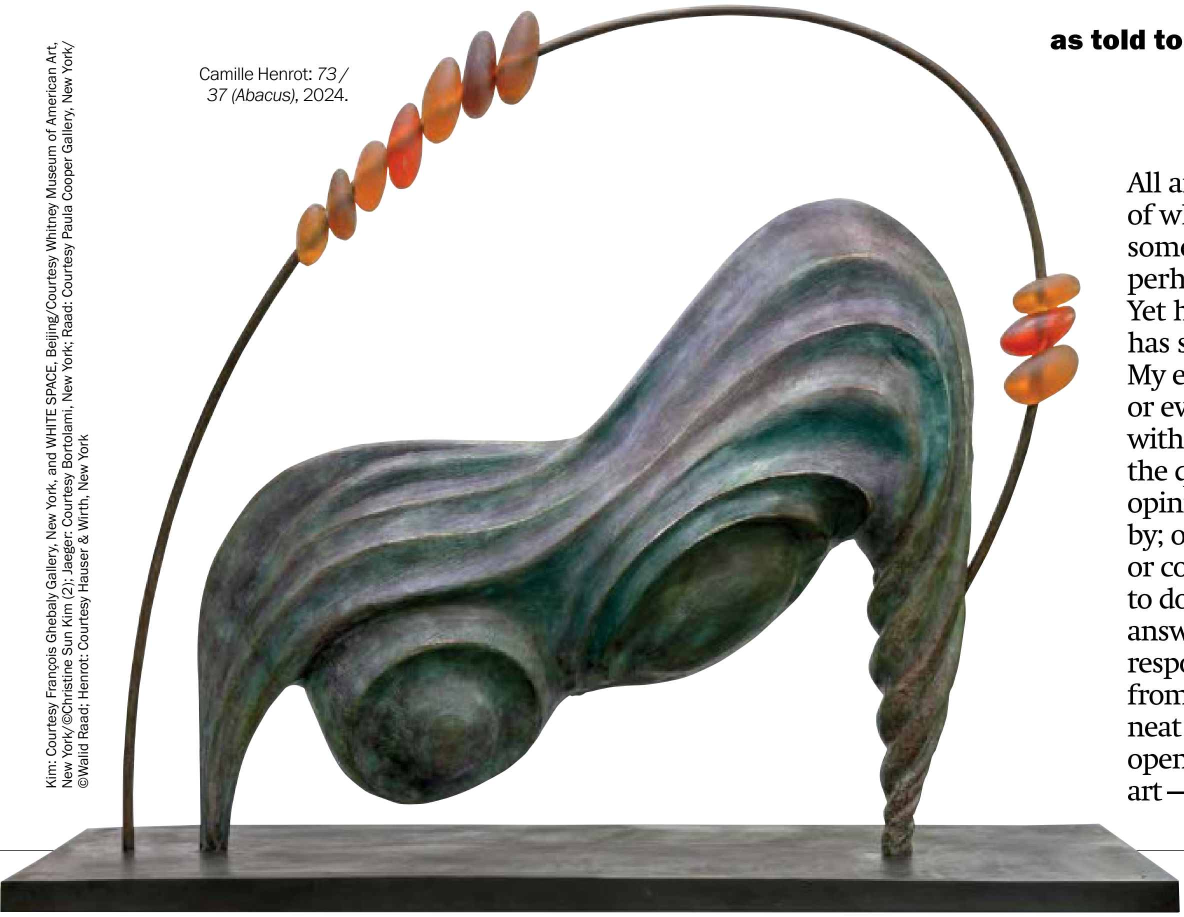


Walid Raad: *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)_Solidere 1994–97*, 2019.

Seven artists respond to an existential question.

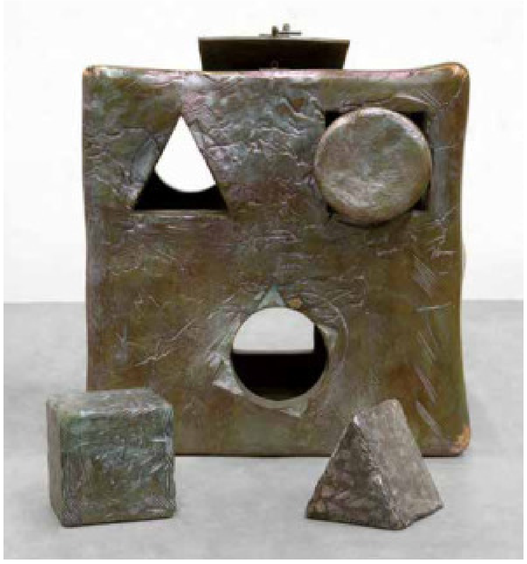
as told to Emily Watlington

All artists have wrestled with the question of why they make art. The endeavor can sometimes feel impotent or indulgent, or perhaps motivated by compulsion alone. Yet here we are, continuing a tradition that has spanned the entirety of human history. My ears always perk up when an artist offers or even implies an answer to art's purpose, with their words or with their work, so I posed the question to seven artists with evident opinions. Some responded with words to live by; others turned the prompt into a creative or conceptual challenge – as artists are wont to do. (Still others not included declined to answer, emailing simply, "I don't know.") The responses below range, as might be expected, from cynical to sincere, with some managing neat answers and others leaning into the open-endedness that the question – and that art – engenders.



Camille Henrot: *73 / 37 (Abacus)*, 2024.

Kim: Courtesy François Ghebaly Gallery, New York, and WHITE SPACE, Beijing/Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York/©Christine Sun Kim (2); Jaeger: Courtesy Bortolami, New York; Raad: Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York/©Walid Raad; Henrot: Courtesy Hauser & Wirth, New York



Camille Henrot: *Misfits*, 2022.

Rose B. Simpson

Pretty much any flight I take from Albuquerque requires a layover. I fly a lot, and always choose window seats, alternating port and starboard sides for each leg. Why? To save my neck. I tend to spend the flight plastered to a window, agape and in awe of the clouds, of the altered and natural skin of our Mother far below. It almost always draws tears.

If I don't switch sides, I've learned I will have neck pain.

Occasionally, I find myself tapping a stranger's shoulder, disrupting their TV show to point frantically at something in that limited oval, maybe an eclipse, an eye-to-eye with a lightning storm, a supreme mountain sunset. Usually they humor me, take a gander, nod, smile, thumbs up, and get back to what they were doing.

Sometimes I wonder about how detachment became the status quo. At what point did we decide to prioritize our comfort above our connection to the world around us? How did we lose the capacity to empathize, to feel on behalf of one another or on behalf of our environment? I am digging within my own humanity – my own capacity to feel – to find the heartbreak this stems from.

OK, so there's that. And then there are those who wake up in the morning and ache, those yearning to reconnect with what was lost … or maybe with what we have never yet known. From this place, the choice becomes to investigate Creation through the creative process, or to perish. For some, without the privilege of access, there is no choice. So much art caters to the intellect, tickles the wit, holds the key to an inside joke. The cost to enter is only $200,000 in art school debt.

But there is also art that ventures into the magic, driven by a deep desire to know something besides disconnection, to become fluent in the poetry of the supernatural.

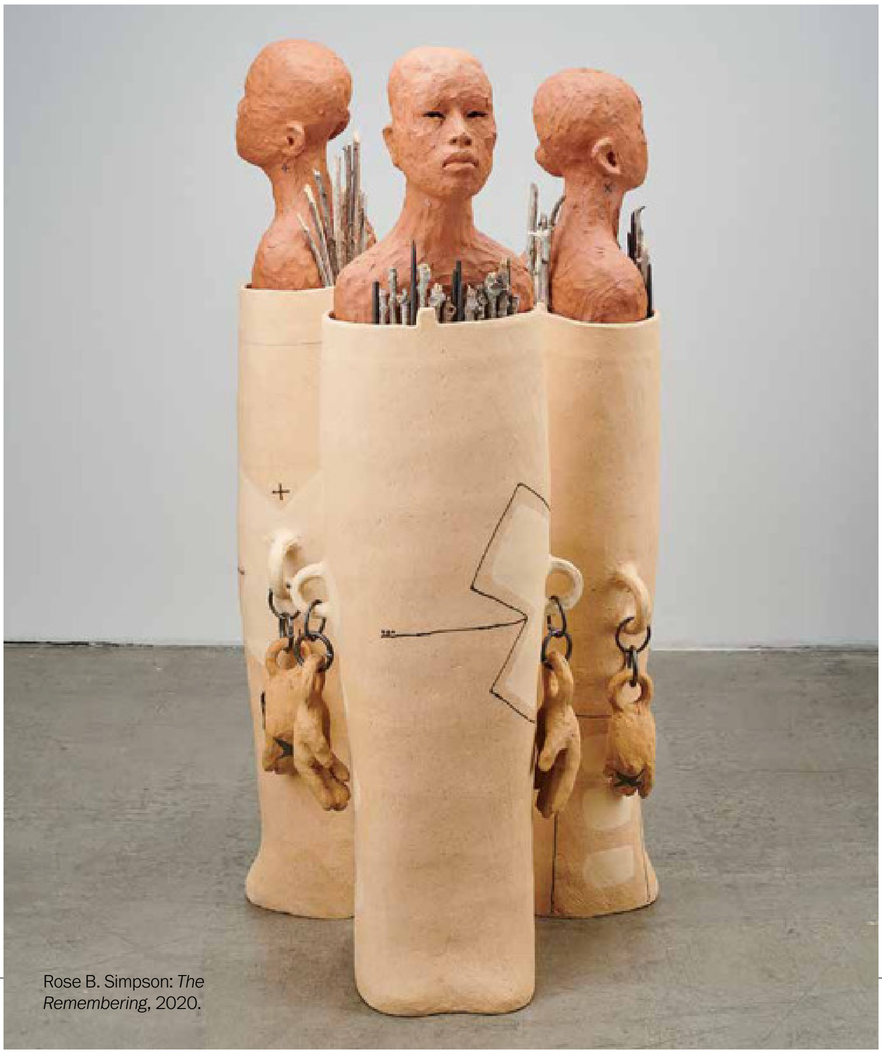
Art is about finding our way home to our humanity. We take so many wrong turns, and each one is a teacher.

Camille Henrot

I don't think art has any inherent duty; it's not "good" for anything innately. Recently, though, I went to a talk at MoMA's R&D Salon called "The Age of the Bully." The first speaker was Simon DeDeo, associate professor in Social and Decision Sciences at Carnegie Mellon University. He mentioned that the members of a group best suited to stand up to bullies are those who are highly visible and have access to different communities, classes, and social backgrounds. It got me thinking: That describes artists quite well. Our purpose may lie in being that counterpower – demonstrating alternatives and standing up to governments, institutions, corporations, and so on – to societal bullies.

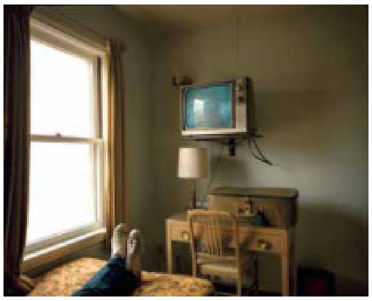
Artists should also be a counterbalance to trends and conformity. Existing outside the norm is a very precious and important position in society. This is why I'm a bit resistant to the idea that artists should also be community builders – which is not to say we're not involved or politically active. I just think there is value to being slightly outside, on the fringes.

I think too much is expected of art. The injunction that art should heal and redeem seems to me a symptom of late-stage capitalism, an extension of American puritanism. It's an attempt to outsource the responsibility of care and justice to people who are maybe the most willing but are also in very precarious positions. Ultimately, I think art is good for representing and defending a space for complexity, nuance, and exception.



Rose B. Simpson: *The Remembering*, 2020.

From top: Courtesy Hauser & Wirth, New York; Photo John Wilson White/Courtesy Jessica Silverman, San Francisco, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



Stephen Shore: *Michael and Sandy Marsh, Amarillo, Texas, September 27, 1974* (top), and *Room 125, Westbank Motel, Idaho Falls, Idaho, July 18, 1973* (left).

Stephen Shore

For more than 40 years, I've taught photography at Bard College. Like most liberal arts colleges, we have distribution requirements, meaning no matter your major – physics, human rights, classics – all students have to take a studio arts class. Some of my students hope to follow a future path as artists, but most have other plans and inclinations. What I've found is that their study of photography opens them to observing the world with intention and attention. And beyond this, they may develop a metacognitive awareness of seeing – not a bad skill to learn.

That is my answer for my students, but as I think about my own journey as an artist, I have this to add: When I first knew I was a photographer, when I was still a child, the world of photography was radically different from what we experience today. There were no galleries in New York that showed and sold photographs. Very few photography monographs were published. The first photography gallery I ever visited, the Heliographers Gallery, opened in 1963, when I was already in my mid-teens. And that gallery sold prints for perhaps $15 or $25. I remember buying a print from W. Eugene Smith, at that time one of America's best-known photographers, for $25. My point is that photography, then, offered the enticements of neither fame nor fortune. For those of us who pursued it as an art, it was simply a "calling." I mean this literally. I felt called to it.

What I've experienced in the intervening decades is that, in the course of becoming fluent in this craft, both technically and aesthetically, I found myself on a path to understanding myself and, through this discipline, to scraping away the accumulated rust of my life.

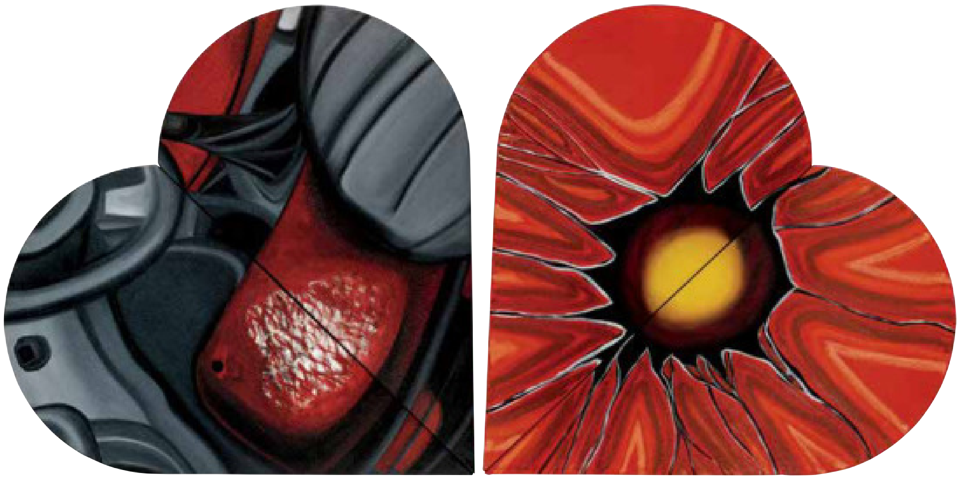
Frieda Toranzo Jaeger

Right now? We are all lost. We don't know what art should do anymore. Because if someone believes that aesthetics can be stripped of politics, that's a delusion. Institutions and curators are complicit in this delusion. Plenty of people would rather do boring safe shows to keep their jobs and their funding than support artists who are challenging the status quo. Solidarity is gone.

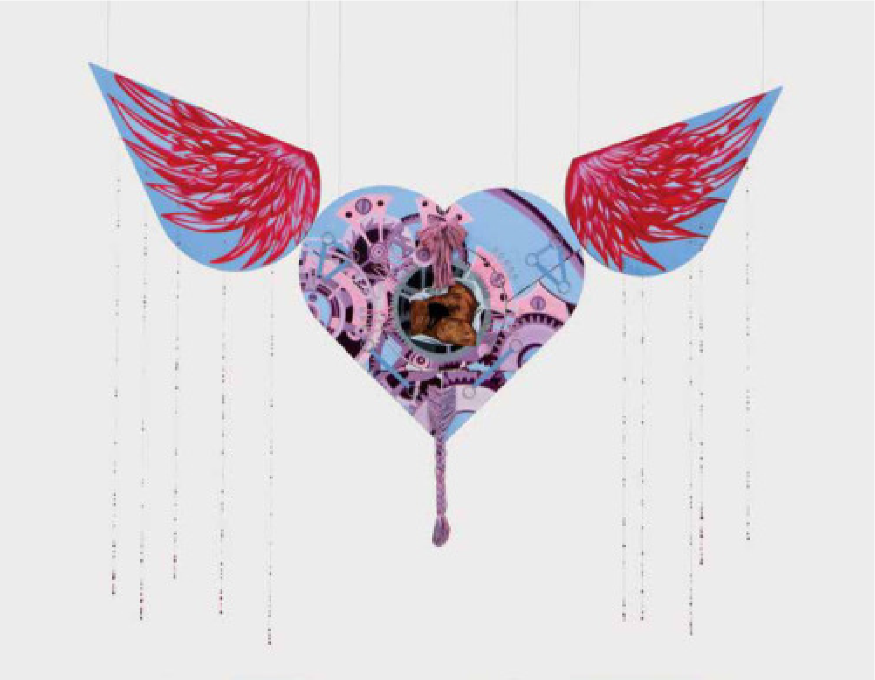
So the question arises: Who is art serving? A board of directors? The market? The model of art-washing through identity politics has come undone in the face of a genocide too politically charged for the people in power. Words like *postcolonial* and *queer* are everywhere. But when you fight for collective liberation, you don't pick and choose which kinds you want. I want universal liberation from genocide.

If you speak up, though, you get canceled and lose all platforms to speak. This is part of why art criticism is so mediocre these days: Criticality cannot take place in an environment where you censor yourself in the name of career or money. We are running out of options in a system that has hijacked most curators and artists, domesticating them into the market.

At the same time, making art is an act of faith. We always hope to find new senses.



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger: *Extinction is the price we pay for our existence*, 2023 (above), and *Here interpretation is confrontation: dismantling what gave rise to it*, 2024 (below).

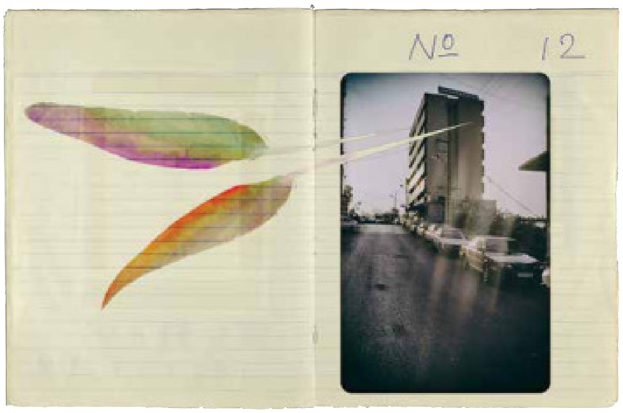


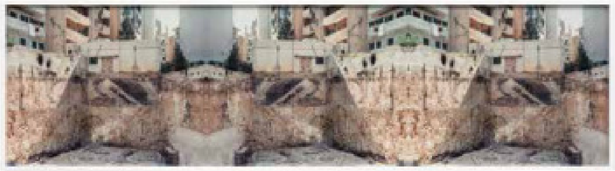
From top: Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York/©Stephen Shore (2); Courtesy Bortolami, New York (2)

Walid Raad

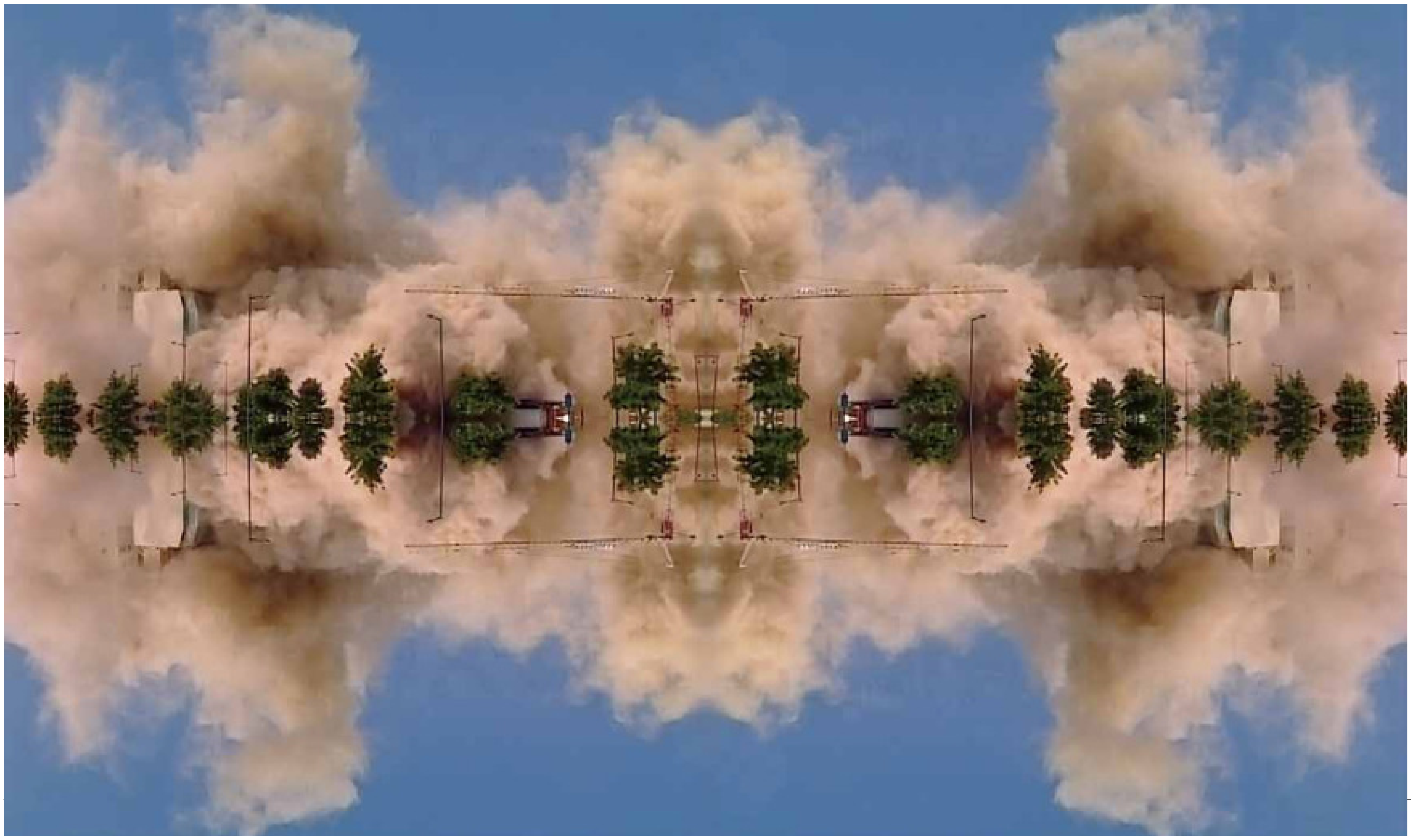
To answer (tangentially) the question "what is art good for?" in 330 words, I lean on 329 words from Jalal Toufic's essay "Creating Universes and/or Worlds that Don't Fall Apart 'Two Days' Later," from his 2017 book, *What Was I Thinking?*:

> The work of an increasing percentage of those who are included in the sociological category of "artist" is limited to the objects, problems, and modes of functioning in this branch of the multiverse, thus is oblivious of the other branches of the multiverse – and of the other realms related to this branch, for example, the undeath realm, the Imaginal World ('ālam al-khayāl), and the dance realm (many branches of the multiverse don't have such supplements); as well as of this branch as a world. That is, it is more and more limited to a very small part of reality. Art can be concerned with the mundane, giving us, to use Deleuze's words, reasons to believe in this world (notwithstanding that it includes the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant207 and Wahhabism in general, 208 etc.); and/or implicated in the otherworldly or unworldly, by constructing radical closures in which otherworldly or unworldly ahistorical fully-formed entities can irrupt; and/or engaged in providing us with a window on the Imaginal World (this is the case with many of the great miniatures of Islamic art) thus giving us access to the Imaginal version of what happened; and/or occupied with creatively presenting other branches of the multiverse. Art and literature and thought can create in our branch of the multiverse, which hasn't fallen apart in 'two days,' exceptions to it that don't fall apart "two days" later and that present within it, intrinsically framed (the physical frame merely makes explicit this intrinsic frame), other branches of the multiverse that haven't fallen apart in "two days." The other branches of the multiverse that art can present may be ones in which art is possible or they maybe ones where there is culture, which is the norm (Godard), possibly in the form of film festivals, biennales of "art," etc., but no exception to it in the manner of artworks that present other branches of the multiverse that don't fall apart in "two days."





Walid Raad: *Sweet Talk: The Tickling Commission*, 1995–2024 (top), and *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)_1994: 662*, 2017 (above).



Raad: *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)_Solidere 1994–97* (detail), 2019.

Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York/©Walid Raad (3)

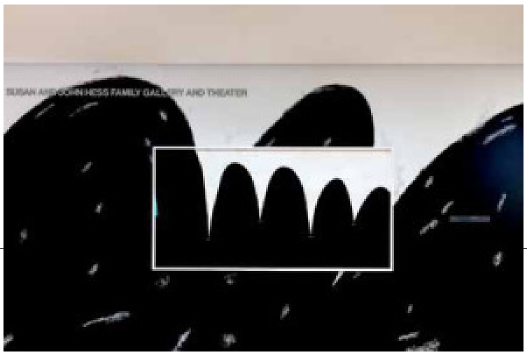
Christine Sun Kim

I started installing my Whitney survey the day after Trump's second inauguration. It was starting to sink in that this is our future. The question "what is art good for?" is becoming a bigger question, and it's becoming harder to answer.

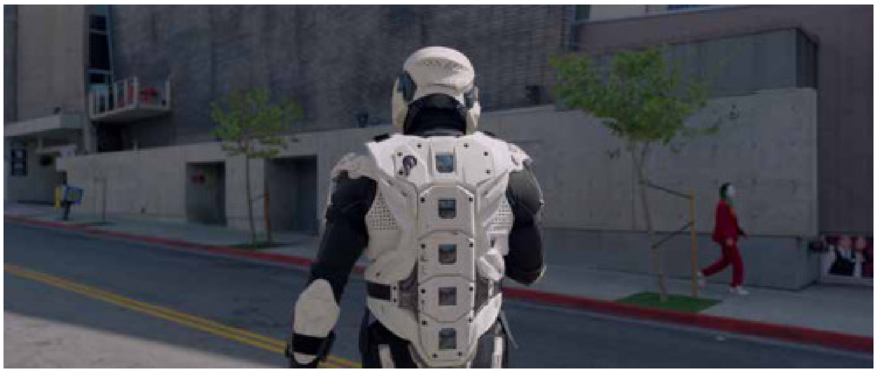
But I started asking myself that question when I was a TED fellow [in 2015], because I was surrounded by people who wanted world peace, or to find cures for diseases. I thought: Well, I'm here for *art,* and what does that do? Being a TED fellow helped me clarify my answer, but I definitely don't have the complete answer still today. I can say that some artists have created change or at least a catalyst for the better. Art has the ability to affect somebody, even one person, who might look at art, empathize a little bit better, and ask themselves "What are some other possibilities that I've never thought of?" They can expand their mind through art. And it could be that that person just so happens to be in circles where there are people in power. That can start a bigger change. But it's something we'll never be able to measure, which is challenging.

Creativity also helps people think better, even from an early age: It encourages people to come up with creative solutions, allows them to ask themselves what they want, and asks them to think through different options. I mean, Leonardo da Vinci thought up the helicopter *because* he was an artist. I'm sick of seeing art and accessibility as the first things to go when there are budget cuts. It makes me wonder about the future. Will we be less creative and unable to come up with new medicine and new technology?

Two views of Christine Sun Kim's exhibition "All Day All Night," 2025, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



From top: Courtesy Kunstverein Braunschweig/Courtesy Andrew Norman Wilson (2); Photos David Tufino/Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2)



Top, view of Andrew Norman Wilson's exhibition "Hirngespenster (Brain Ghosts)," 2019, at the Kunstverein Braunschweig, and above, *Impersonator,* 2021.

Andrew Norman Wilson

The Biennial's opening remarks took place in the museum courtyard, which is ordinarily accessed after paying a $30 entry fee. But on this night it was off-limits to anyone whose name wasn't on the list. Notable curators displaying angular haircuts and geometric eyewear were flown in from Milan, Beijing, Aspen, Braunschweig, and Minneapolis. Gallerists displaying quiet luxury and personality disorders had flown themselves in from New York, London, and Paris with their artists from Ghana, Colombia, and Iran in tow.

They were all gathered before aluminum steps ascending to the starchitectural edifice. The frocked Biennial curator arrived at an acrylic podium, then paused upon noticing a man wearing nothing but soiled Buffalo Bills sweatpants, peering into the courtyard. She composed herself and declared: "This exhibition amplifies the voices of over 100 artists who are grappling with today's most pressing issues." Far-right extremism. The climate crisis. The ongoing war in Ukraine. The housing crisis. Disinformation. Artificial intelligence. Social media. Even texting and driving. Her show was basically an encyclopedia of emergencies made up of anti-colonial video essays, sonic archaeologies, radical-care manifestos, and queer lichen.

The man in the soiled sweatpants remained fixated on the curator as a flow of pedestrians streamed past him, ignoring his destitution. The curator continued: "This biennial offers a way for artists, art professionals, and the public to come together during this fractured moment of sociopolitical upheaval." Thus concluded her opening remarks.

Amid tepid applause, a twink handler whisked the curator offstage.

The man wearing nothing but soiled Buffalo Bills sweatpants tracked her from the opposite side of the slatted aluminum wall, and when she and her entourage spilled out toward a black SUV, his stained hand grasped her arm. She shrieked.

"Security!" yelped the handler.

"I'm sorry – I just wanted to thank you, beautiful," said the man.

She looked into his wide, pink eyes. "For what?"

"For using the word 'unhoused.'" ●

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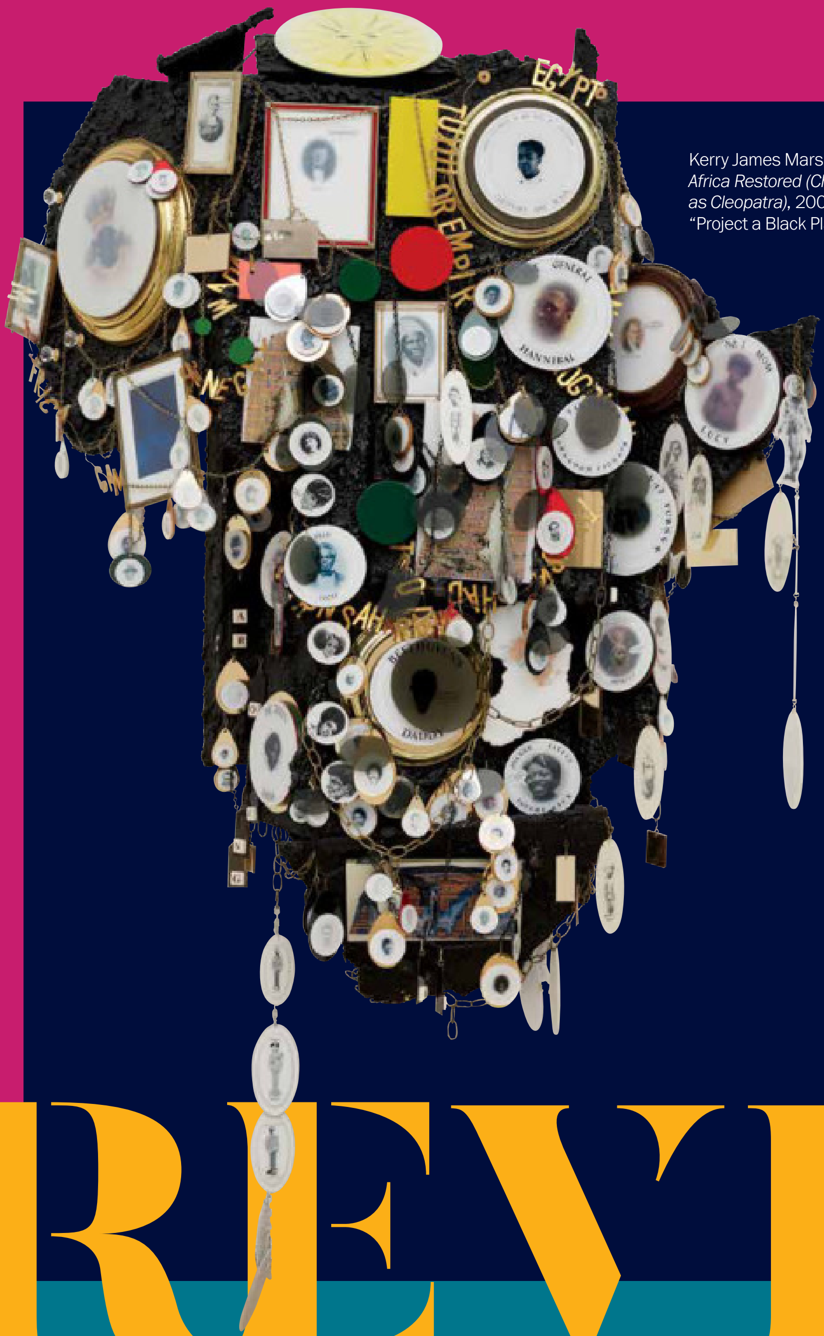
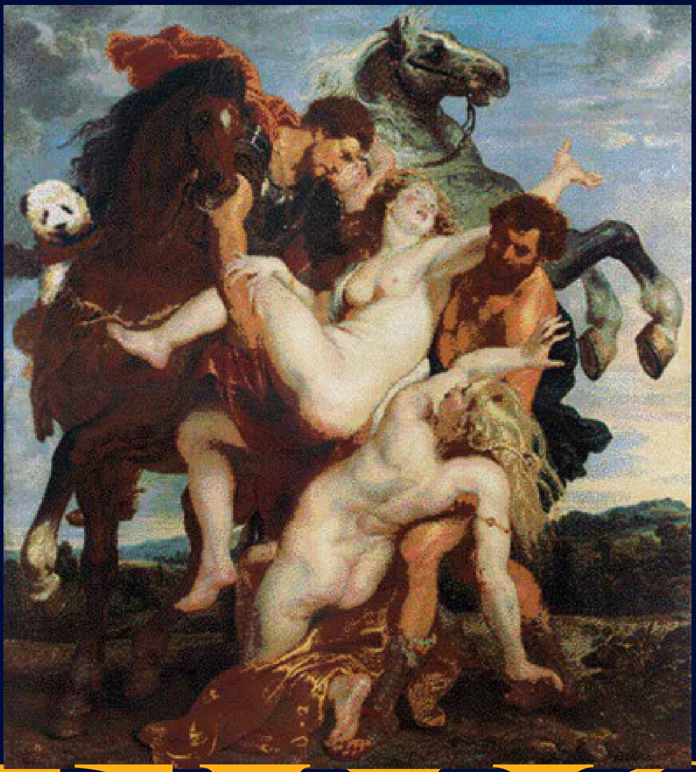
Judy Chicago, *Purple Atmosphere*, 1969. © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo courtesy of Through the Flower Archives; the artist; Jessica Silverman Gallery; and Jeffrey Deitch.

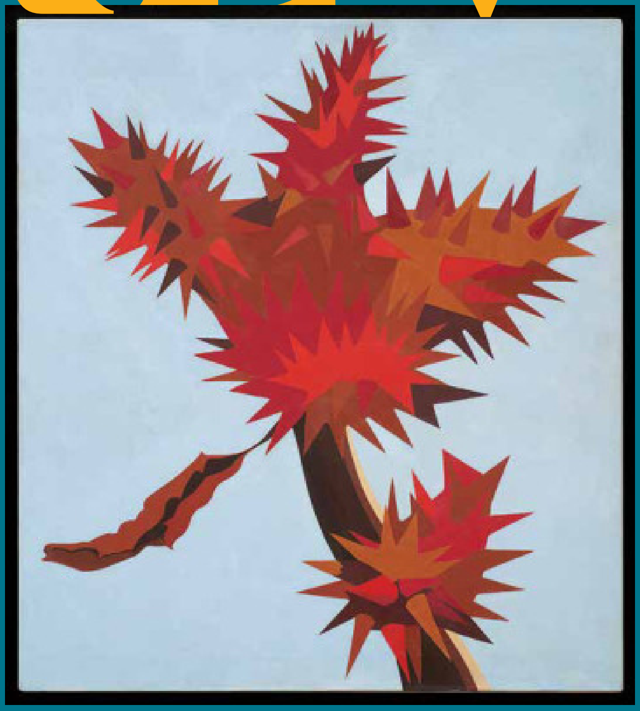


Kerry James Marshall: *Africa Restored (Cheryl as Cleopatra)*, 2003; in "Project a Black Planet."



Ai Weiwei: *Untitled (After Rubens)*, 2020.

REVIEWS

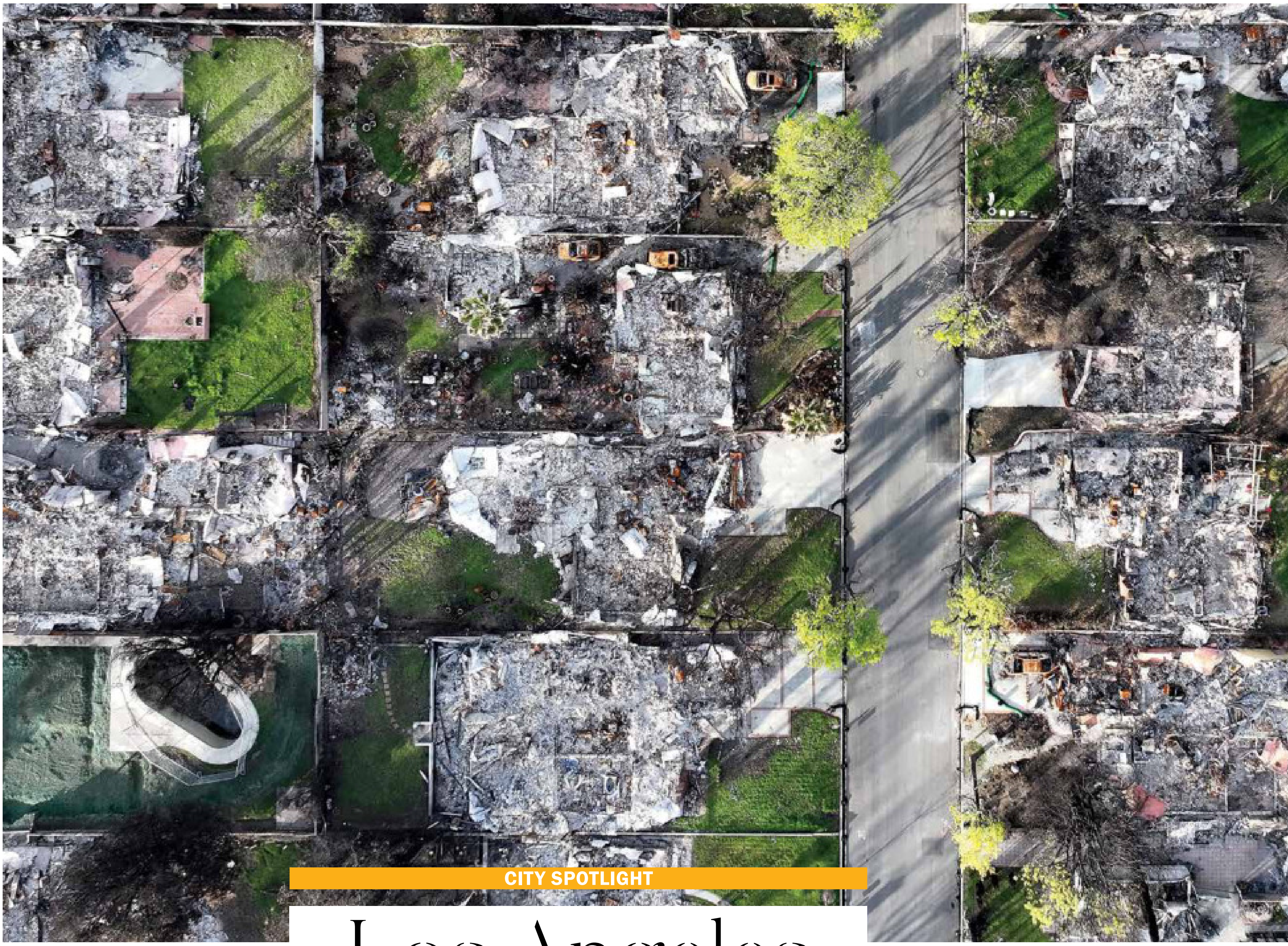


G. Peter Jemison: *Red Power*, 1973; in "Indigenous Identities: Here, Now & Always."

Exhibitions in Los Angeles; Amsterdam; Chicago; London; New Brunswick, New Jersey; and Seattle

One of Leigh Bowery's costumes, 1988.

Clockwise from top left: Courtesy Art Institute of Chicago; Courtesy Steven Paneccasio and Ai Weiwei Studio; ©Tate Photography/Courtesy Leigh Bowery Estate; Courtesy Tia Collection



CITY SPOTLIGHT

Los Angeles

For LA artists, getting back to work after the fires means playing the long game.

In the time between the January fires and February's Frieze week, Los Angeles galleries and museums seemed intent on supporting affected artists directly, and on commemorating the immense loss the city suffered. Emergency grants and mutual aid efforts sprang up everywhere, and every other gallery seemed to host a benefit show or a panel about Altadena's storied Black artistic legacy.

Most of these efforts dissipated after Frieze week. The benefit shows have all come down. And while the mutual aid and other volunteer-led efforts are ongoing, attention is shifting elsewhere. Meanwhile, little has changed for artists who lost their homes or studios. Driving through Altadena two months out, burnt-out cars still lined the streets, and traffic lights were still not working. None of the debris seemed to have been cleared either. For those most affected, rebuilding is still a hypothetical.

"I'm on my fifth place," Kathryn Andrews said more than eight weeks after, having lost her rented Pacific Palisades home. It was the second time she'd lost a home to fire, the first being the Bobcat Fire in 2020. This time around, she has a better idea of what to expect from rebuilding. "It hits you over time," she said.

Andrews contributed a piece to one of the city's many benefit shows. Her untitled contribution was a small, pea-size dot painted on the wall at eye level. It harkens to '70s Minimalism yet is very much of the fires: She stenciled the dot directly on the wall using

An aerial view of Altadena, Calif., showing surviving trees and new greenery amid homes destroyed by the Eaton Fire, March 2025.

Photo Mario Tama via Getty

ash and soil from the home she lost.

Though Andrews had volunteered her artwork to the show, she told me she felt uneasy about participating. She appreciated that the show was conceived to benefit artists directly, but still "felt that there was something a bit perverse about mounting an exhibition and attempting to represent the crisis so quickly. It's a catastrophe that's hard to represent, that exceeds representation in a way." A lot of other artists seem to be facing this crisis of representation too.

Though the Palisades fire burned more acreage and received more news coverage, the Eaton fire disproportionately hurt the area's artists: 73 percent of those served by Grief and Hope, a mutual aid group cofounded by Andrews that has raised over a million dollars for affected artists and arts workers, referenced a single zip code, Altadena's 91001.

The area has long been a hub for LA artists. Kenturah Davis, whose family history in Altadena goes back to the 1950s, told me that her parents moved there as part of the Great Migration. Like artists Charles White and John Outterbridge and writer Octavia Butler, her parents were drawn to Altadena because middle-class Black families could buy homes there before that was feasible in other parts of the country. After growing up in Altadena and completing her MFA at Yale, a teaching position at Occidental College drew Davis back to the neighborhood.

Her studio survived the Eaton fire, but her home did not. She learned this when her father, a plein air painter who goes by Keni Arts, hiked over to Kenturah's house. "He FaceTimed me so I could see," Davis said. "And that's how I learned the house was gone."

Keni had brought his painting kit with him on this hike, and that day, he began a new series of paintings he dubbed "Beauty For Ashes." As Altadena continued to burn, he painted the lot where his family's home had once stood.

I asked Davis if she shared this impulse to make work about the fires so immediately in their aftermath. "Not in the same way," she replied. "Part of the reason why I've been struggling with getting back to work is that I feel like I need to account for what's happened. But I'm not going to all of a sudden start doing landscape paintings."

Instead, Davis is returning to materials that have newfound significance after the fire, such as weaving. Her mother, Mildred, is a quilter, and in the fire's aftermath, Davis's gallery, Matthew Brown, organized a show benefiting her group, Alta/Pas Quilt Circle, an extension of the African American Quilters of Los Angeles. She also returned to working with scented incense paper, noting that the lingering fragrance feels like an apt metaphor for the loss of her home to fire.

Altadena's artistic legacy has more recently been a draw for other artists, among them Kelly Akashi. Until January, Akashi was living and working in a home once owned by artists Jim Shaw and Marnie Weber, who had built a studio with a kiln in the backyard.

When she evacuated, Akashi wasn't able to take much besides her cat. She thought about going back to retrieve more of her belongings, but decided against it – for her own safety, and to avoid seeing the fire, worried she might become afraid of flames, which are essential to her work in glass and metal.

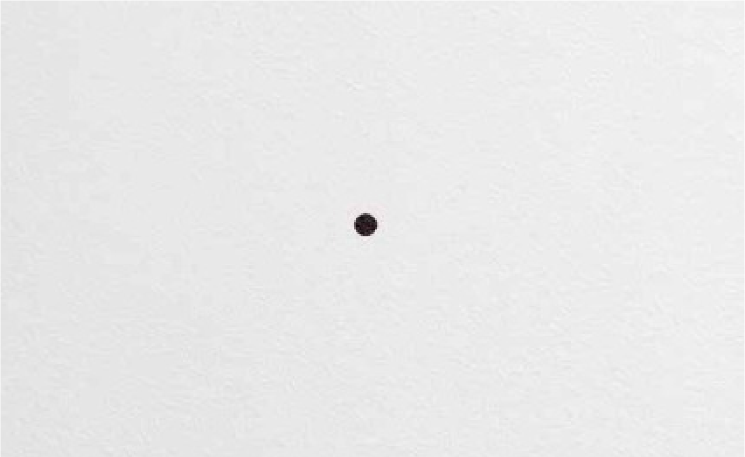
She lost much of the work that was slated to debut January 31 in a show at Lisson Gallery. Some of what appeared in the show, which was pushed back to late February, was spared by being offsite at the time of the fire. Several bronze sculptures had been in Akashi's studio during the fire and managed to survive, but she had to remake much of the work. One such piece shows the lower half of Akashi's face; another two resemble seedpods. "I didn't clean off what they went through," she said. "I could have sandblasted and completely stripped them. But the patinas you see were created by the fire."

Christina Quarles is also trying to figure out what to do with work damaged by fire debris. She and her family lost their home for the second time in nine months in the Eaton fire: In April 2024, an electrical fire destroyed their home. Also lost in the Eaton fire was the rebuilding progress they had made since then, as well as the Airbnb where they had been staying during the reconstruction.

Quarles said that after the first fire, she and her wife felt compelled to rebuild as quickly as possible. But they've decided to rebuild more slowly this time. "It's just too painful to feel like everything is replaceable," she said. They had just replaced all their young daughter's books from the first fire when the second one hit. "I don't want to buy *Goodnight Moon* again," Quarles said. "I've already bought it twice."

Quarles's backyard studio survived both fires, and she joked that she couldn't tell whether this was a good or a bad omen. In the Eaton fire, it was the only structure on their block that survived, though the four paintings inside were damaged. Quarles treats all her canvases with PVA size, which melts at a low temperature. In her case, the emulsion melted and became porous, then readhered after being dusted with debris blown in through an open window.

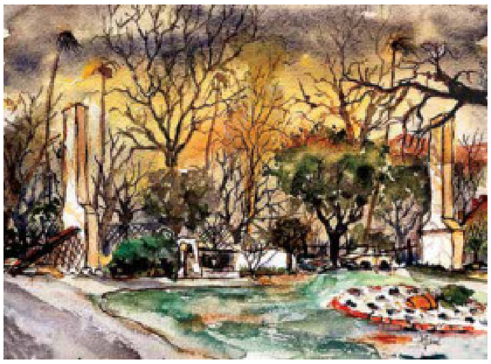
Quarles must now decide what to do with these four paintings. Two of them formed a diptych – she started one panel right before the 2024 fire, and the other the week after; Quarles said she finds the debris damage interesting conceptually, which echoes how Akashi and Andrews are trying to represent the fires and their damage. The debris adhering to the canvases might age the paintings faster, so she could make an insurance claim for their total loss. She described this as the more financially practical route: She'd be paid for them as if her gallery had sold them; however, the insurance company would own them. "The thought of that made me so sad, even if it's financially maybe a better move, because I don't know if I can sell



A work with no title by Kathryn Andrews, donated to the “One Hundred Percent” benefit exhibition, 2025.

them or not,” she said. The gamble is whether or not a collector would see the value in this debris-affected diptych.

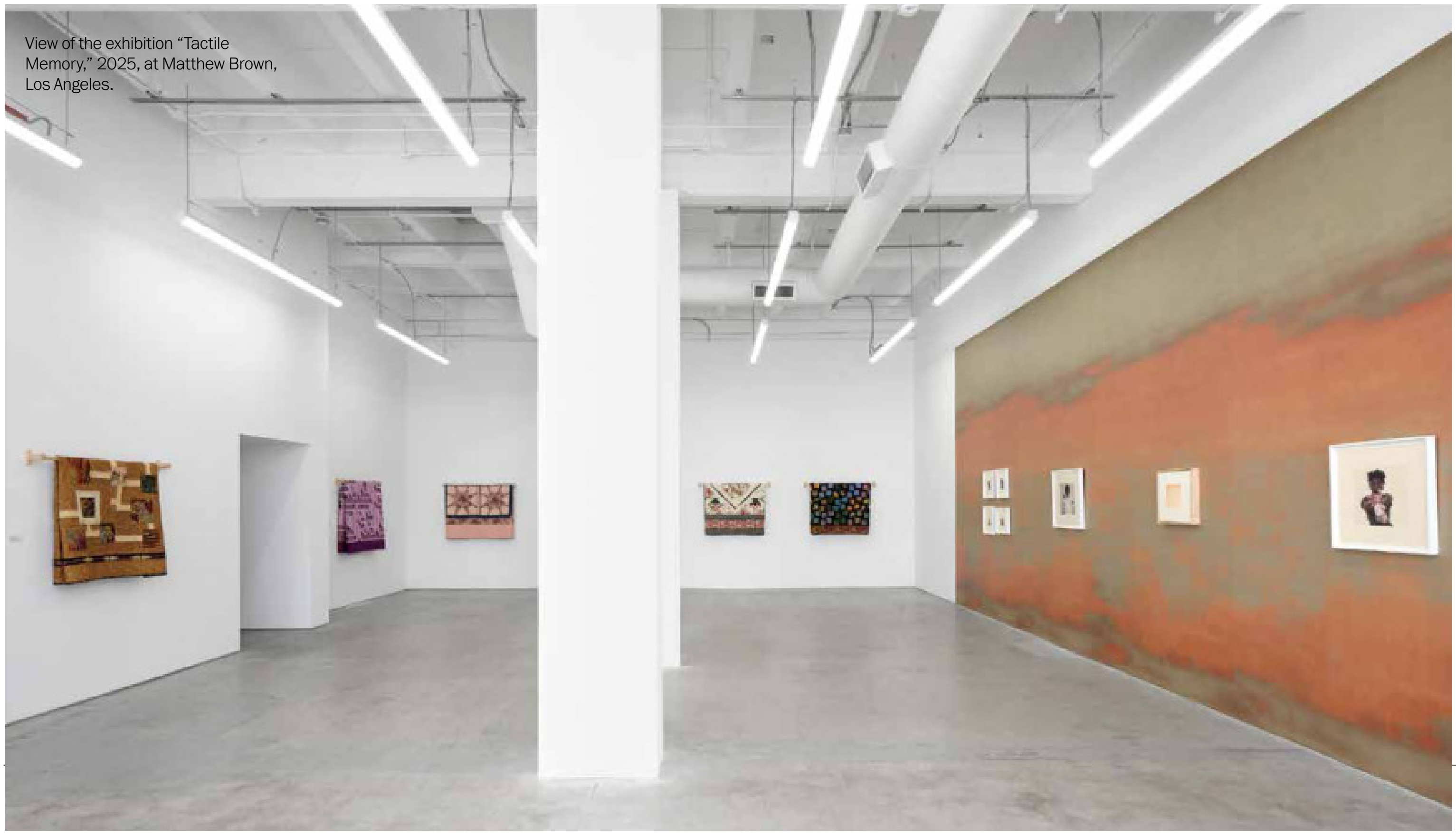
Deciding whether or not to rebuild is personal for every artist. Anecdotally, it’s said that older folks are tending to sell, while younger homeowners seem more inclined to rebuild. Artist Paul McCarthy is turning 80 this year, and after he and his wife, Karen, lost the place in Altadena they had called home since 1989, he told me that he has no interest in rebuilding: “I don’t want to spend the next four or five years building a house.”



Keni Arts: *Home BFA (Beauty For Ashes)*, 2025.

“Overnight, you become a minimalist,” he said, referring less to his art than his life. “How many pairs of shoes do I need, two?” This quip echoed other artists who said that losing their homes or studios gave them clarity about what’s important to them.

McCarthy said his experience of the fires reminded him of his 1995 sculpture *The Box*, a piece he made after walking into one of his home studios, and getting the idea to turn it into a sculpture. McCarthy instructed his studio assistants to take everything out – every paper, journal, notebook, piece of furniture, every work in progress; he then



View of the exhibition “Tactile Memory,” 2025, at Matthew Brown, Los Angeles.

Middle: Courtesy Keni Arts; Bottom: Photo Paul Salveson

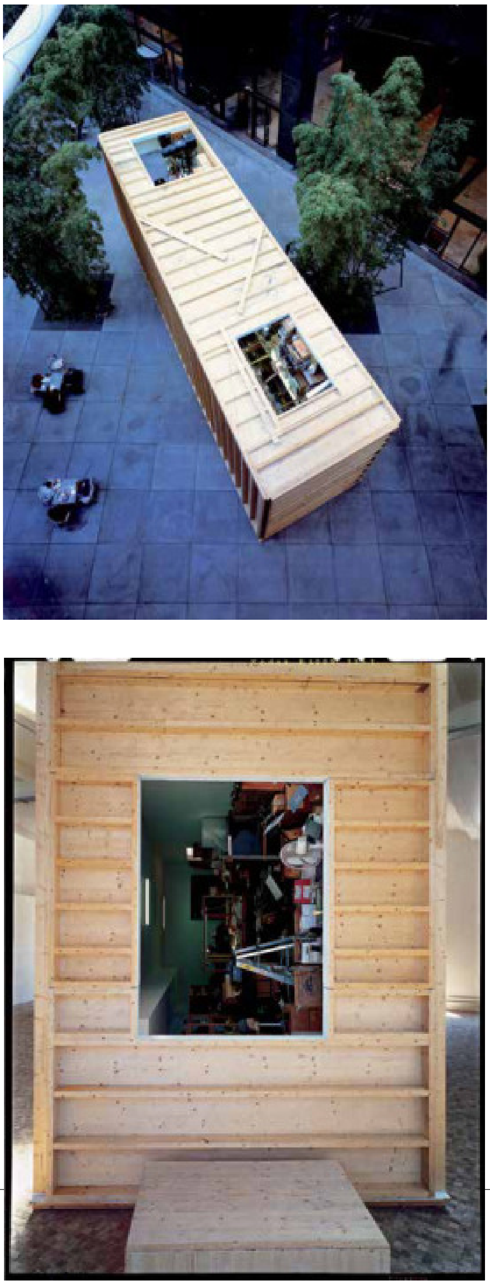
Kelly Akashi: *Witness*, 2024–25 (left), and right, view of Akashi's 2025 exhibition at Lisson Gallery, Los Angeles.

built a wooden-crate replica of his studio to scale, and glued or bolted to its floor every one of these items precisely where they had sat in the original before turning the box on its side. Like much of his work, it has no trace of a Minimalist sensibility. After he shipped it out, his studio was empty. "It's strange how I lost that room twice," he said. McCarthy had a similar impulse about a week after the fires, when he started to try drawing everything that had been in the house from memory. He first drew a washing machine, then a stove, and then a couch, and plans to continue this series and see where it goes.

Some artists lost personal archives in addition to their homes, studios, and works-in-progress. This is especially difficult for artists later in their careers, like video installation artist Diana Thater and her husband, T. Kelly Mason. Part of what makes this loss so devastating is that it included some of Thater's most well-known pieces, of which there was only one copy. Paintings and sculptures get sold and go out into the world, but video artists more often have to steward their own work in obsolete technologies, she told me.

Thater is now trying to reassemble her archive by contacting the museums and collectors who have acquired her pieces over the years, asking them to loan her her own work so she can make duplicates. She hopes to digitize her pieces, a process especially important for older video works in formats like laser disc and Beta tape. Thater's works all come with instructions for how to update them, but she has little confidence that museums or collectors have followed them.

More immediately, the biggest logistical and practical hurdle artists are facing is finding space. Thater had to offer $600 a month over the asking price to secure an apartment in Montecito Heights. "People think that I'm rich because I show with David Zwirner, or that David will buy me a house now," Thater said. "But it doesn't work that way." She and her husband are still sleeping on a mattress on the floor; she said she feels like she's in college again. Kenturah Davis's parents thought they had found a rental, until the realtor asked them to prove they had a million dollars in assets, even though their insurance company would cover the cost of renting the place.

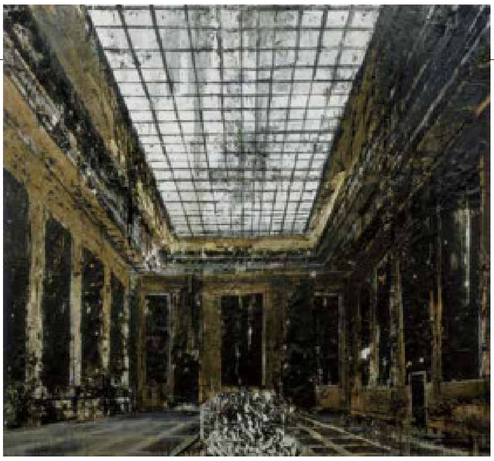


Left, two views of Paul McCarthy's installation *The Box*, 1995. Top, at the IBM Building, New York, 2001, and bottom, at the Hauser & Wirth Collection, St. Gallen, 1999.

Something that's always been appealing about Altadena is its proximity to nature, and I noticed that a number of artists living there have consistently made work about the relationship between humans and the planet, and more specifically about climate change. Thater and Akashi both said that they plan to double down on this strain of their work. "People are so focused on the loss, but that misses the bigger point, that we're collectively and mindlessly destroying our planet, without reflecting upon the fact that we have agency in this," Andrews said. "We're burning our own houses down." ●

—Jack Lowery

From top: ©Kelly Akashi/Courtesy Lisson Gallery, Los Angeles (2); Photo Dennis Cowley; Photo A. Burger



Anselm Kiefer: *Innenraum* (Interior), 1981.

AMSTERDAM

Anselm Kiefer

Van Gogh Museum and Stedelijk Museum
Through June 9

Anselm Kiefer’s Amsterdam blockbuster pits art against despair.

Let’s call this “The Work of Art in the Age of All This Bullshit.” You know the list by heart: climate disaster and its unevenly distributed miseries, global pandemics, racialized violence, state brutalities, forced dispossession, institutional collapse, war there and there and also there, neofascism, extinction-threatening technology, drowned migrant children on the shore. Ebullient oligarchs but the world is burning. Everything is moving too fast, the solutions are coming too slow, and are probably already too late. That old curse: May you live in interesting times. You do.

“Anselm Kiefer – Sag mir wo die Blumen sind,” an ambitious double show in Amsterdam spread across the neighboring Van Gogh and Stedelijk Museums, offers a rejoinder to the state of our world with an appropriately robust artist to play Atlas, holding its risky critique aloft.

With Kiefer, every institution has to decide what big story it’s going to tell. The man just turned 80, so there are many, and they are well-rehearsed. There is the one that begins in March 1945: A child born in Donaueschingen right before the end of World War II, who grows up playing in its literal rubble, builds one long *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (“coming to terms with the past”) from Nazi horrors. With sculptural paintings such as *Dein goldenes Haar Margarethe* (Your Golden Hair Margarethe, 1981), scarred with ash, flowers, and straw, the capital-A Artist navigates the conceptual largesse of nouns – History, Guilt, Memory, Responsibility – in dialogue with the likes of Paul Celan. In this version of the story, the capitalizations never end.

Or, one might recount the controversy that greeted “Besetzungen” (Occupations), the 1969 photographic series of Kiefer performing the Sieg Heil salute that invited questions about intention, citation, and irony. This story culminates in Jed Perl’s scathing review of Kiefer’s 1988 New York retrospective in which he excoriates the artist for maximalist canvases that reduce the Holocaust to aestheticized symbol, treating it as “a sensuous texture.”

Perhaps you prefer to get your narrative templates from the cinema. With Kiefer, you have a few options. There is Sophie Fiennes’s *Over Your Cities Grass Will Grow* (2010), which shows the silk factory that the artist transformed into his studio-cum-Gesamtkunstwerk in Barjac, France, where he settled after leaving Germany in 1993. Fiennes cinematically translates Kiefer’s interest in material and form, lingering on abstracted tunnels, corridors, and columns, all set to György Ligeti’s unworldly *Atmosphères*. A biography lacking a protagonist – no human appears for the first 20 minutes – this is a story of studio labor as terroir, situated in a place. By contrast, in *Anselm* (2023) – we’re now on a first-name basis – Wim Wenders returns to Barjac with a focus on the artist as cosmic philosopher, using fictional reenactments to construct his own legend of the singular genius of alchemy and myth.

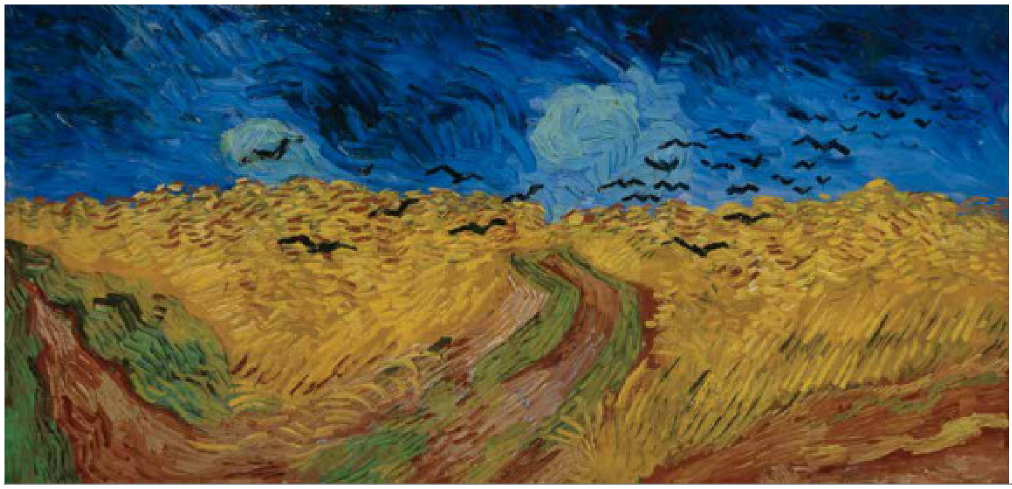
Today, in light of installations like *Geheimnis der Farne* (Secret of the Ferns, 2007), and *Die Erdzeitalter* (Ages of the World, 2014), a new story regards Kiefer’s debris- and seed-strewn piles as harbingers of the imminent end of the Anthropocene, permadeath of the human experiment. This account supplants the Kiefer of Germanic guilt with something closer to Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* via Walter Benjamin: “Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe.”

How brave, then, of the Van Gogh and the Stedelijk to organize their show around none of these old stories. Instead, they risk an accusation of worldly indifference, even political quiescence, turning inward and looking with fresh eyes at the thing largely forgotten and ignored. I mean, of course, the art itself.

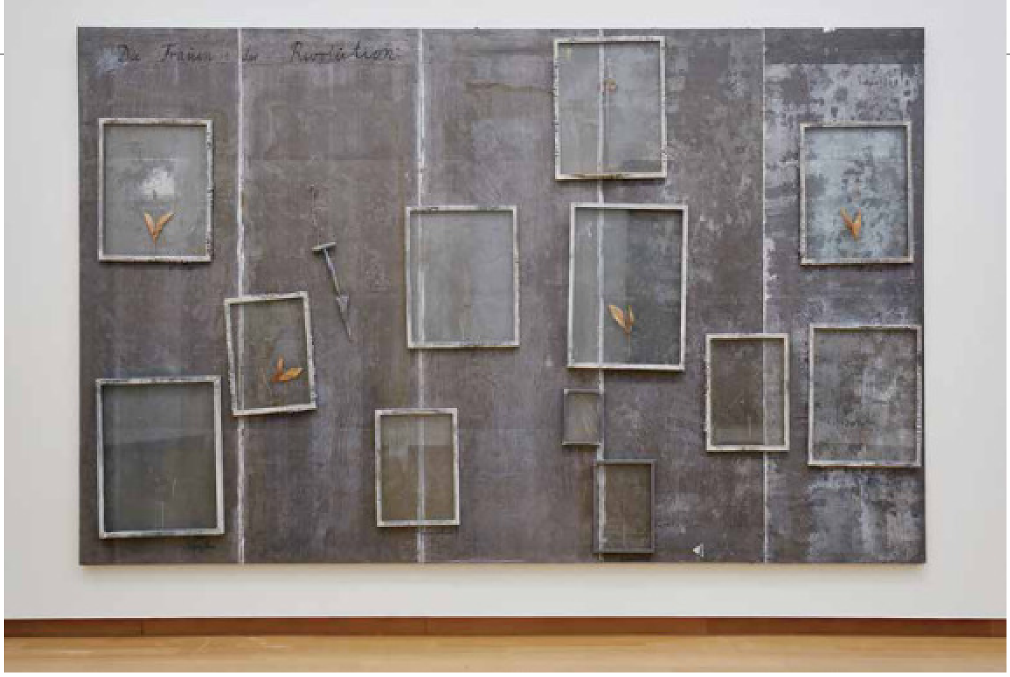
“Sag mir wo die Blumen sind” is a diptych, with the Van Gogh Museum focused on the influence of their house post-impressionist painter throughout Kiefer’s artistic life, while the Stedelijk displays justifiable pride in their early and passionate advocacy for Kiefer’s work, presenting everything in their collection, and featuring a monumental new commission.

This organizing principle – Kiefer via Dutch painter and Dutch institution – is neither arbitrary nor art historical navel-gazing. In a 2019 lecture at Tate Britain (reprinted in the sumptuous exhibition catalog), Kiefer spoke of Van Gogh’s enormous influence on his work, dating back to sketches he made at age 18 while retracing Van Gogh’s footsteps through Benelux and France. These previously unexhibited charcoal drawings, displayed on the uppermost floor, show an unformed Kiefer of heavy line and trying hand. Elsewhere, the likes of *Sunflowers Gone to Seed* (1887), various 1890 wheatfields, *Shoes* (1886), and *Self-Portrait* (1887–88) are displayed alongside 11 of Kiefer’s monumental works, including *De sterrennacht* (The Starry Night) and *Die Krähen* (The Crows),

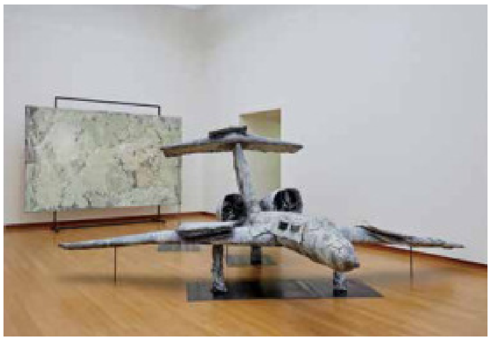
Vincent van Gogh: *Wheatfield with Crows*, 1890.



From top: Courtesy Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Courtesy Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



Kiefer: *Die Frauen der Revolution* (The Women of the Revolution), 1986.



Kiefer: Untitled, 1989 (on wall) and *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (Journey to the End of the Night), 1990 (foreground).

both from 2019. The juxtapositions create a formal conversation: One's 19th-century thick brushstrokes become the other's 20th-century wood, wire, gold leaf, and straw, while both artists explore the perspectival possibilities of a high horizon line, inducing claustrophobia and expansiveness at once. Even where the motivic connection seems most direct, as in Kiefer's use of the sunflower – in *Sol Invictus* (1995), the aggressive verticality of showering seeds meets the vulnerable horizontality of a supine human form – the effect is less straightforward homage than shared lifelong project. One sees two artists attempting to represent an unreachable, fracturing world.

The Stedelijk is also telling a story about art, this time about the sheer range of Kiefer's oeuvre. There is the early Kiefer of *Innenraum* (Interior, 1981); the Kiefer of text and delicate dried flowers in *Die Frauen der Revolution* (The Women of the Revolution, 1986); the full-scale installation warplane of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (Journey to the End of the Night, 1990); and *Steigend, steigend, sinke nieder* (Rising, Rising, Sinking Down, 2009–12), a towering film-reel tumble of photographic prints on lead with images from the artist's corpus, including some from "Besetzungen," a history neither of Deep Time nor modern Europe, but the personal history of artistic reputation.

The centerpiece at the Stedelijk is the titular installation, a series of canvases created for the monumental, light-soaked staircase at the building's center. Taking its name from Pete Seeger's 1955 anti-war anthem "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" as popularized by Marlene Dietrich, the work stages figures of mind and body – from pre-Socratic philosophers to Charcot's hysterical female patients – set against luminous gold backgrounds, thick layers of paint and clay, hung assemblages of cloth, and piles of dried rose petals. The effect is to walk among the paradox of life: that it continually begins, that it continually ends. But while your eye scans the sublimity and poignancy of this generality, a striking detail – say, a clay-crusted uniform – recalls that the ending-ness of life does not come for all in the same way. Seeger took lyrical inspiration from a Cossack folk song. Impossible not to think of Ukraine, but also Sudan, Gaza, Syria, walking through the piles of crumbling petals.

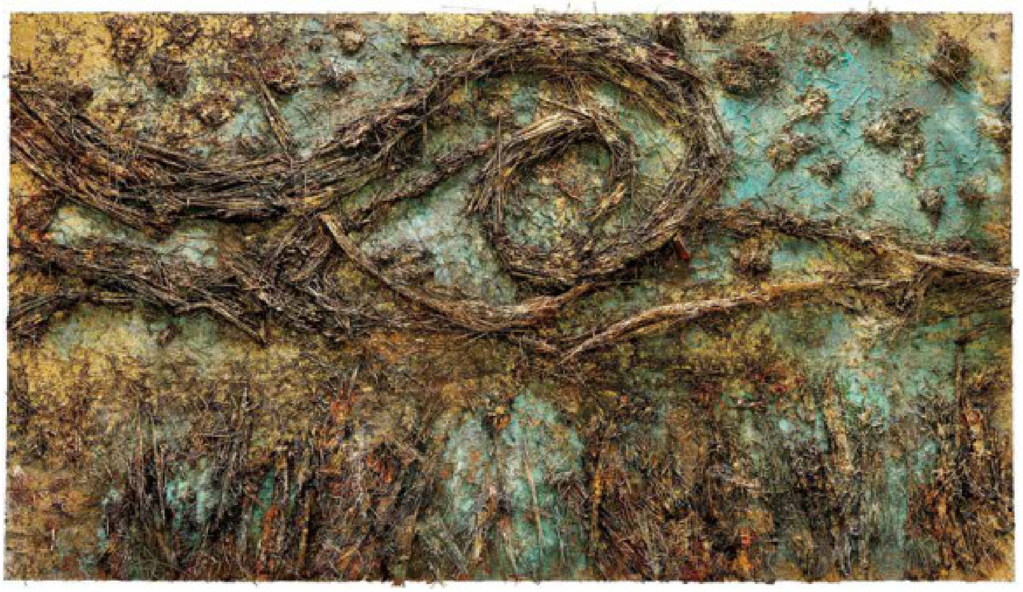
This, then, is the question that will divide the audience. What right does any artist and any institution have to stage, in gold leaf and rose, the question "Where have all the flowers gone?" at this historical moment and to answer it with artistic inspiration, formal conversations, and matters of brushstrokes, light, perspective, and scale?

Other plants might answer. Facing down a world of cruelties and wars, Voltaire's Candide meets a man absorbed in the task of work, content to tend to his orange trees. I now understand, says Candide: We must cultivate our garden.

Art can still be a provocation against despair. This show's gamble is that it can be so not despite, but precisely by, remaining curious about the work artists undertake. Candide is proposing the optimism of activity: of seeding, preparing, making. We must cultivate our garden. What else, in the end, can we do? ●

– Eugenie Brinkema

Kiefer: *De sterrennacht* (The Starry Night) , 2019.



Courtesy Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Photo Michael Floor/Courtesy Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; ©Anselm Kiefer

CHICAGO

“Project a Black Planet: The Art and Culture of Panafrica”

The Art Institute of Chicago
Next Stop: Museum of Contemporary Art, Barcelona

A Pan-African blockbuster portrays the continent as a monolith.

As African nations moved toward independence in the 20th century, competing ideas about nomenclature jockeyed for supremacy, employing terms like African, Black, Arab, and Afro (American, Brazilian, Caribbean, etc.) in an attempt to shape legible blocks of solidarity from diverse populations. Given that “Project a Black Planet: The Art and Culture of Panafrica” (PaBP) declares itself the “first major exhibition to survey Pan-Africanism’s cultural manifestations,” bringing together 350 objects ranging from fine art to material culture, I expected to see complex narratives on view, with Pan-African philosophies pushing against one another just as they had clashed with mainstream Western visions.

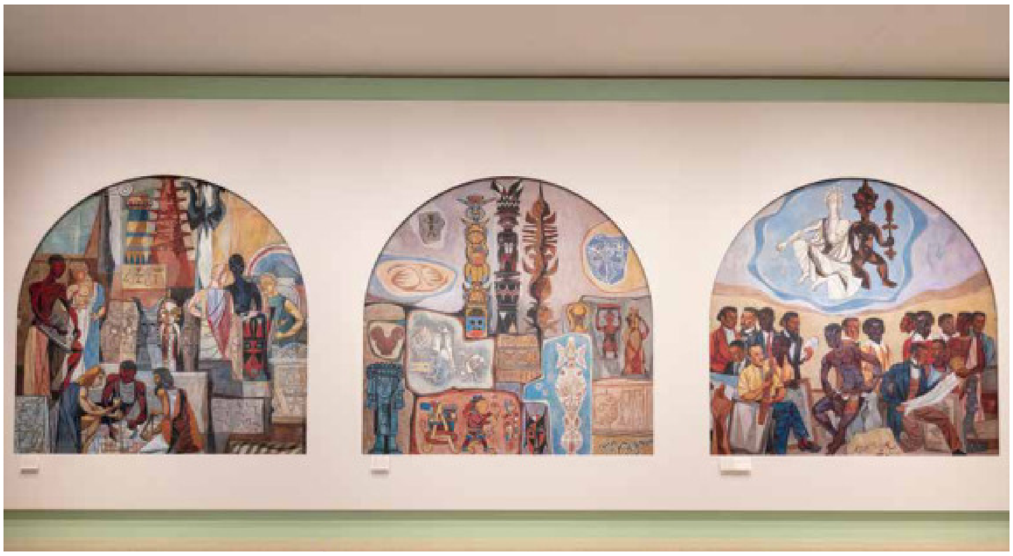
Instead, thematic galleries with little through line (Interiors, Agitation, Revenants, etc.) became fractured worlds, each feeling progressively tacked-on and disconnected. There is enormous benefit to rendering this who’s who of Black artists, but many seem to be displayed more for the artists’ status than their significance to the Panafrica narrative, such as Wangechi Mutu’s sculpture installed in the entryway niche, or Zanele Muholi’s self-portrait hanging awkwardly in the corner of the final gallery. “PaBP” falls prey to the more-is-more blockbuster model that flattens takeaways by oversimplifying concepts like “Blackness” or “Panafrica” across hundreds of disparate objects.

After passing through a reproduction of Hale Woodruff’s mural *The Art of the Negro* (1950–51) in the large gallery that served as the exhibition’s prelude and postlude, a small gallery invokes the Pan-African flag as a symbol of transnational racial solidarity, with artworks by David Hammons and Chris Ofili. From there, three large galleries unpack three core Pan-African philosophies: Garveyism, Négritude, and Quilombismo. The artworks presented to illustrate Pan-African ideals left more questions than answers: What tenets were vital for stakeholders? How could Panafrica(s) be manifested? How would Pan-Africanism change society for African or Afro-Diasporic peoples?

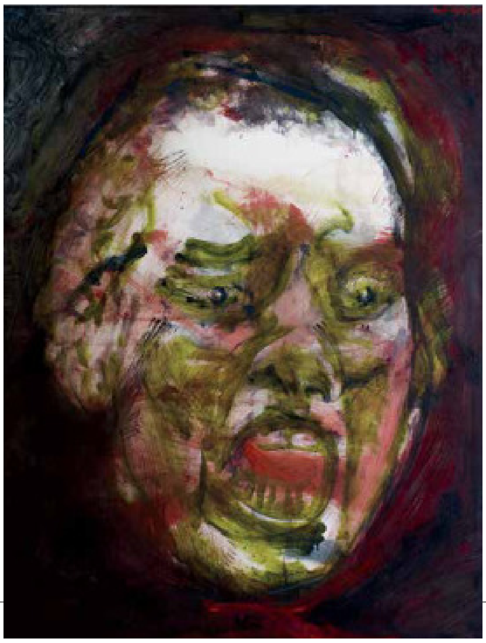
While some foundational tenets shine through – self-determination, community building, reordering history to center Black voices – I spent most of my time trying to figure out how the curators connected the artworks (each excellent as stand-alone pieces, by the way) to the particular gallery’s theme. African American Alma Thomas and Egyptian Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar both painted outer-space imagery, but hardly with “Garveyist formations as a grounding,” as the theme label indicated. Similarly, two jackets and a mixed-media sailboat by Afro-Brazilian Arthur Bispo do Rosário were installed as the centerpiece of the Garveyism gallery, the only rationale being that Garvey had transformed ships from symbols of displacement to vessels for reconnection through his commercial Black Star Line enterprise.

The dissonance between the show’s narrow interpretation of Pan-African theories and its wide selection of works on view became clearest in the Négritude gallery. Négritude, as formulated by Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and others, revalorized the historic contributions of Black creatives toward the development of a universal civilization. But the movement was rather exclusive, referring to “Africa” as only Black peoples in sub-Saharan

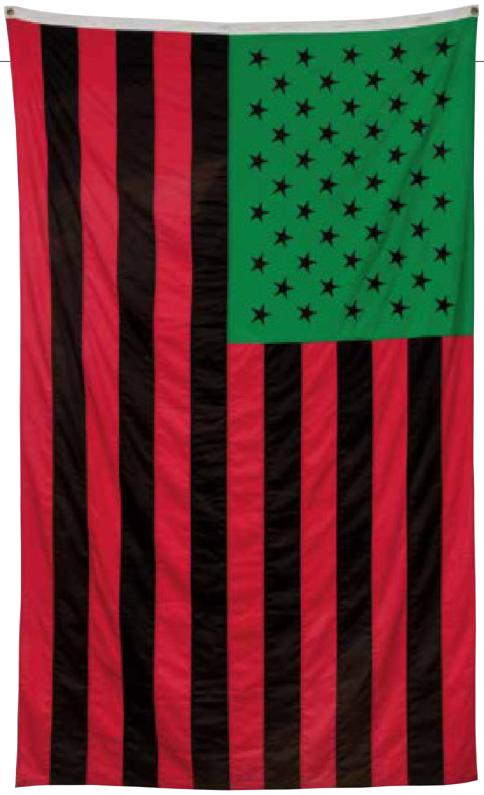
Three panels from Hale Woodruff’s mural *The Art of the Negro*, 1950–51.



Iba N’Diaye: *La femme qui hurle*, 1986.



From left: Courtesy Clark Atlanta University; Courtesy Bassam Chaitou Collection



David Hammons: *African-American Flag*, 1990.

Africa and their diasporic descendants. When Senghor hosted the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Senegal in 1966, he largely excluded Arab-Berber representation, reinforcing an image of a Black Africa rather than Africa as a geographic space with multiracial peoples.

Only three years later, the Organization of African Unity would host the Pan-African Festival of Algiers, countering Négritude's focus on Blackness as a rallying point for solidarity in favor of a broader African identity that coalesced around resistance to Western imperialism, advocating for not only stronger connections between all African nations, but also between Africa and other spaces of resistance. Further demonstrating the complexity of the term "Pan-Africanism," Nigeria changed the title of their 1977 festival to the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, acknowledging the increasingly fraught tensions for these identity markers.

So where were the didactics outlining these competing visions of Panafrica? In the Négritude gallery, it dawned on me that the rhetoric of "PaBP" as a whole was following a similar faulty logic where "Pan-African" meant "Black." There was no explicit acknowledgment of North African artists who wouldn't have identified as Pan-Africanist or Black – even though "PaBP" featured stellar pieces by such artists, including Gazbia Sirry, Ahmed Cherkaoui, and Inji Efflatoun.

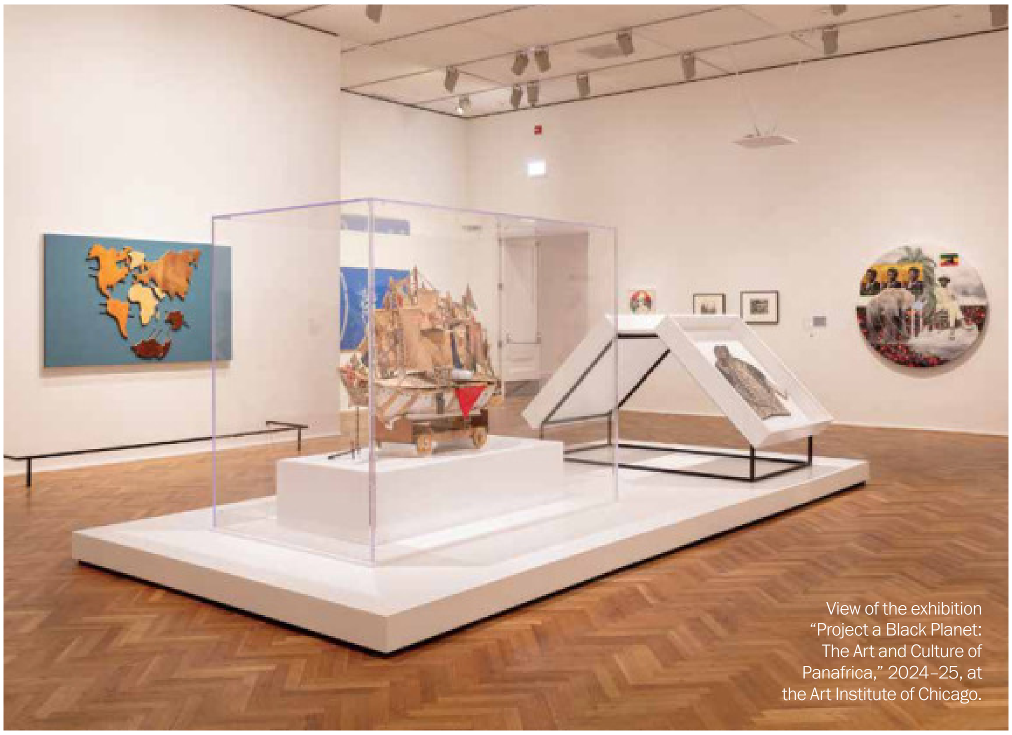
Still, many of the selected Négritude artists were strong, with Ben Enwonwu, Palmer Hayden, Richmond Barthé, Wifredo Lam, and Papa Ibra Tall sensitively reclaiming the trans-Atlantic exchanges between traditional African sculpture and European Modernism. But on this matter too, wall texts flatten narratives, with Colette Omogbai's deconstructed figure *Agony* (1963) mischaracterized as yet another "masked body" despite the artist stating that she makes no reference to forms from traditional masquerade, thus unfortunately rehashing reductive tropes grounding all African Modernists in indigenous tradition.

The three Pan-African philosophy galleries were so generalized that they left little foundation for the five subsequent themed rooms. Of course, there are resonances across time and space for artists of African heritage, but nearly every gallery followed a fatiguing formula: contemporary North African sculpture, Sub-Saharan Modernist painting, African American video, Afro-Brazilian assemblage … as if implying that most any Black artist of any generation could be plugged in interchangeably.

And while I can appreciate that many artists could indeed have been selected to speak to each theme, I was repeatedly perplexed by certain choices. Why were a painting of a Black albino by white South African Marlene Dumas and a minimalist sculpture by Pakistani Rasheed Araeen two of the handful of works selected to define the "Blackness" gallery? How was South African expatriate Valerie Desmore's oversize painting of a crab an appropriate neighbor for Iba N'Diaye's impassioned paintings of cries in the "Revenants" room, where works were meant to represent "healing with communal faith"? With nothing beyond the painting's title beside the piece for a relatively unknown artist, it's just one of many instances where the viewer is left adrift.

In the center of the show, the Circulation-themed gallery featured a horseshoe-shaped vitrine with a chronological display of 100 pieces of ephemera from Pan-African history. Highlighting the first issues of *Jet* and *DRUM*, the flights of the first African airlines, photographs from different liberation/independence movements, and many other publications, postcards, and paraphernalia, this display effectively related how different Pan-African actors intersected across the decades. Still, the general viewer is likely to walk away from the show with the impression that "African" artists are all on the same page, no matter where or when they lived. It's not as if the show should highlight the divides between Black and African peoples; it's that it ought to honor the diversity of the continent's strategies, challenges, and beliefs. The "Pan" does not mean that "Africa" is a monolith – it indicates that all iterations of what it means to be African should be included. The potential remains for an insightful show that addresses Pan-African philosophies in their complex tensions, and perhaps "PaBP" is the springboard needed to inspire more nuanced reflections. ●

– Joseph L. Underwood



View of the exhibition "Project a Black Planet: The Art and Culture of Panafrica," 2024–25, at the Art Institute of Chicago.

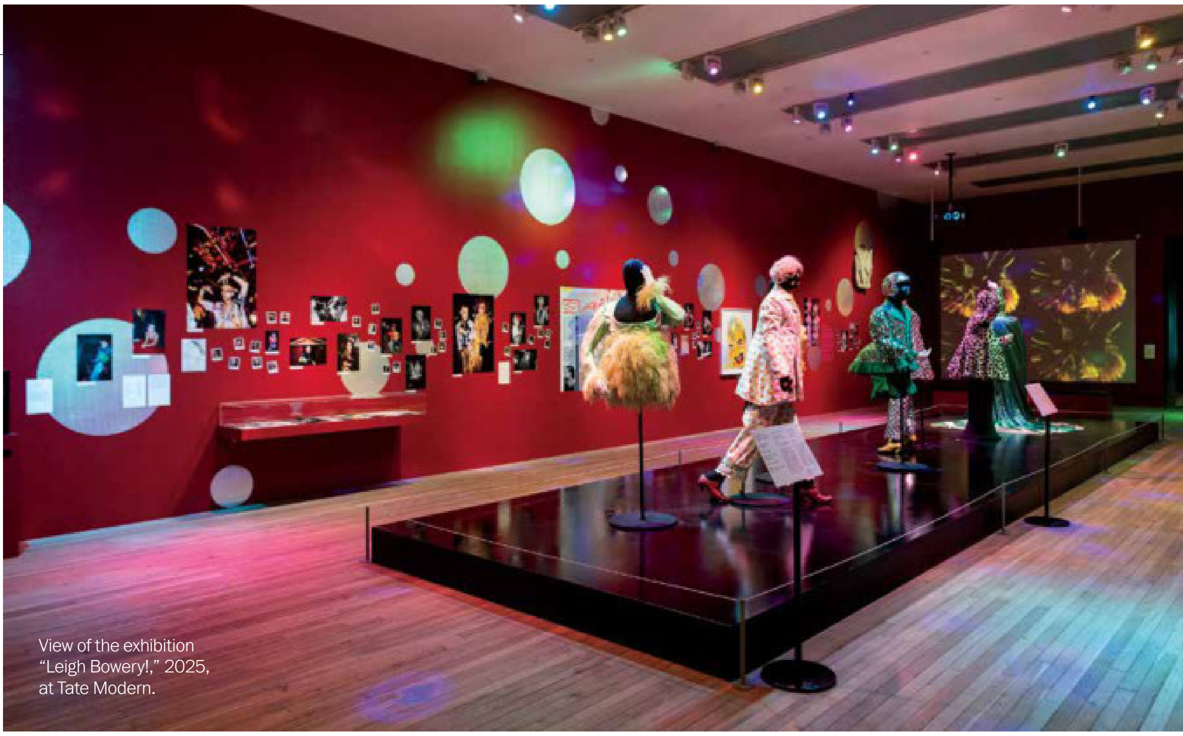
Courtesy Collection Marilyn and Larry Fields Collection; Courtesy Art Institute of Chicago

LONDON

"Leigh Bowery!"

Tate Modern
February 27–August 31

The outlandish British style icon and performance artist stars in a complex and conflicting institutional show.



View of the exhibition "Leigh Bowery!," 2025, at Tate Modern.

"I never want to look ordinary," Leigh Bowery told *i-D* magazine in 1985. Tate Modern's new exhibition on his life and work proves that he succeeded – and then some. A gay icon in 1980s and '90s London club culture, Bowery was a fashion designer, performance artist, and total original from the start. The show follows him from his arrival in London from Australia at the age of 19 through the inception of his infamous club Taboo, his establishment as an avant-garde fashion visionary, and his rise to greater fame and eventual exploration of graphic varieties of performance art. As the exhibition progresses, it grows darker, following Bowery's path to body horror and the grotesque. A good portion of the work on view is not by Bowery but, instead, depicts him in his role as a muse (to use a loaded but apt term) among fellow club-goers and other artists ranging from underground figures to Lucian Freud.

"You wouldn't be interested in me if I didn't look the way I do," Bowery once said. "Let's face it, nobody would." It's a line that gets to the heart of his own fraught sense of self-worth, as well as the way he judged others. The first few rooms in the exhibition focus on Taboo, which – during its 1985–86 run before being closed down by a police drug raid – was known for its embrace of sexual freedom and creative risk. Frequented by the likes of Boy George, George Michael, and John Galliano, it was also famous for turning away anyone who was not suitably outrageous in terms of style and comportment. Bowery was ruthless in crafting the world he wanted both inside and outside the club, ensuring that he was surrounded by people who matched (or at least respected) his commitment to pushing boundaries. Tate's gallery walls are papered with snapshots and Polaroids from Taboo, evoking the grimy authentic abundance of its hedonism.

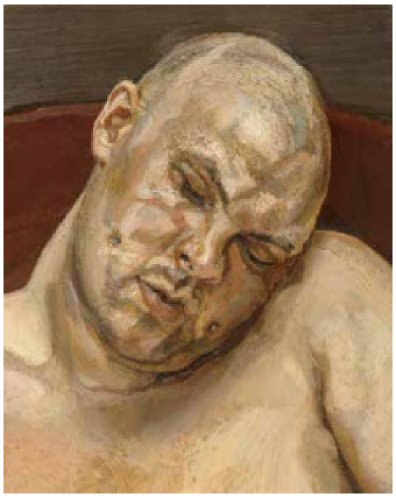
Bowery's fashion designs, which he made for himself for clubbing and then eventually also for dancers in ballets by choreographer Michael Clark, are absolutely wild. Between the garments on display in the galleries and the many photos and videos of them in action, we get a comprehensive sense of his outlandish design sensibility. Many outfits have bulbous silhouettes reminiscent of Marie Antoinette, while others feature balaclavas. Still others include ballerina skirts that leave their wearers' asses bare. Bowery was also obsessed with polka dots, which he connected to signs of illness: zits, herpes sores, and other varieties of pox that he sometimes circled on his face when they were naturally occurring or drew on when they were not.

There are elements of Bowery that are particularly challenging to viewers and curators in 2025. For example, one wall text notes that Bowery performed in blackface and as a Nazi, wearing swastikas, in the 1990s. Neither is pictured anywhere in the exhibition, but the text calls such gestures "offensive." There are also images of live performances in which Bowery sprayed the audience with enema fluid from his anus, which was just one of several fluids he produced on stage. Shock value was one of his main objectives.

The second half of the exhibition focuses mostly on Bowery's performance art, which grew more extreme as he neared the end of his life in 1996. His most iconic performance,

Charles Atlas: *Because We Must*, 1989.

Lucian Freud: *Leigh Bowery*, 1991.



Clockwise from top: Photo Larina Annora Fernandes/Courtesy Tate, London; ©Lucian Freud Archive; ©Charles Atlas/Courtesy Luhring Augustine, New York

presented many times, was his “Birth” act, in which he gave birth onstage to his collaborator, Nicola Rainbird, who would become his wife. She began the performance strapped to his chest upside down, then emerged in a bloody show, both of them screaming and covered in stage blood. Bowery also incorporated body horror into other performances, including safety-pinning his mouth, cutting himself with glass, and harming himself in various other ways.

The philosophically transgressive nature of Bowery’s world drew in part on his exploration of the idea of uselessness. In the face of the relentless capitalism of the ’80s and ’90s, what did it mean to refuse to participate in the pursuit of wealth and respectability? Bowery’s life revolved instead around the pursuit of highs of different kinds – many of them drug-induced but also related to the ecstasies of performance, community, dance, music, and unbound creativity.

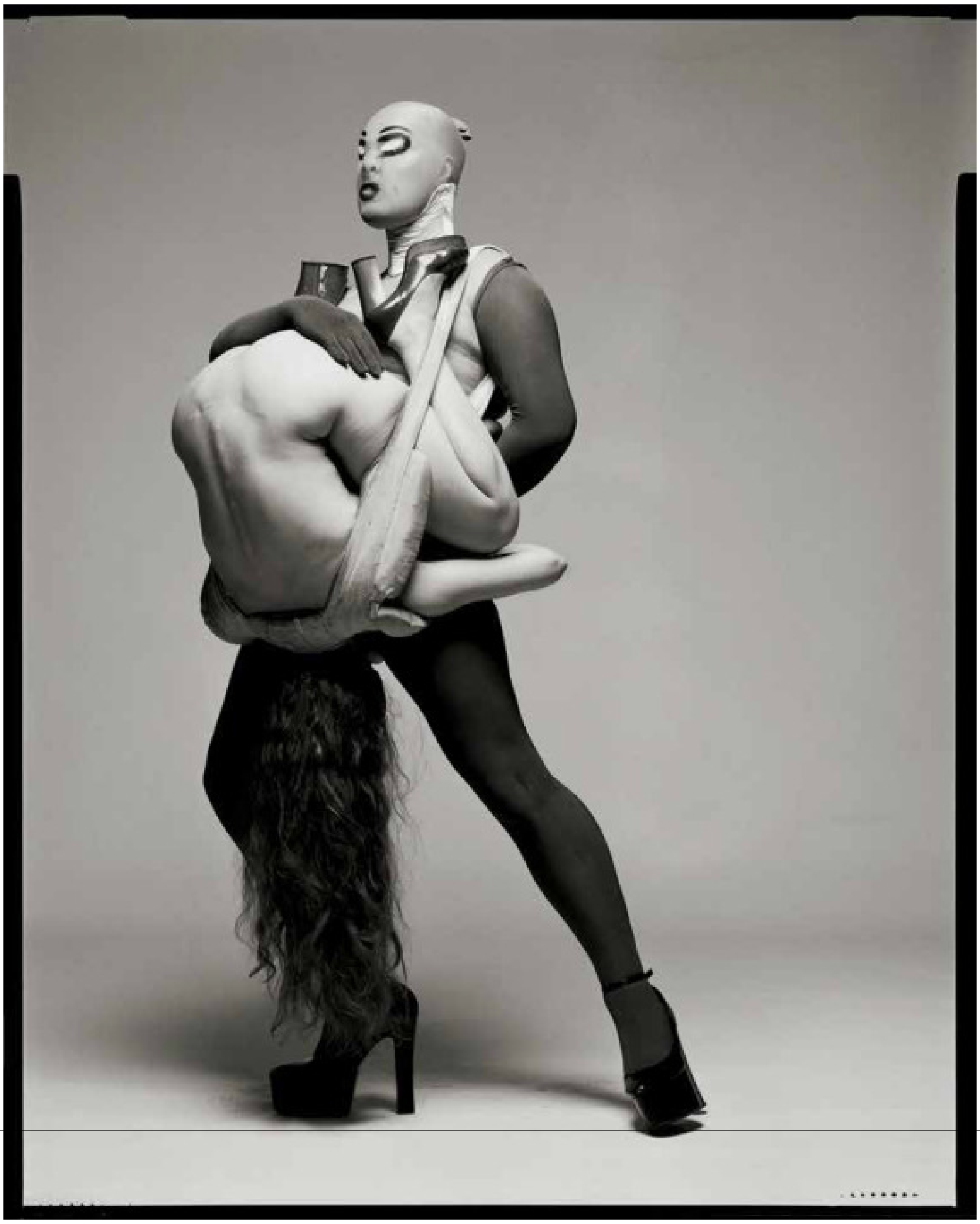
In an introduction at the exhibition’s press preview, one of the curators, Fiontán Moran, said that Bowery’s work asked “how uselessness could be a productive position.” But the very nature of uselessness, and the quality that makes its celebration transgressive, is that it is *not* productive. Which brings up a kind of bind: The institutionalization of Bowery’s work, which is antiestablishment at its core, feels counter to its ethos in many ways. It’s a catch-22 of course, because the alternative is for art like this never to find its way to wider audiences. But the disconnect between the work in this exhibition – much of it conceived in squat communities and underground clubs – and the robust pillars of the institution of Tate is jarring. It raises important questions about the evolution of the museum space and shifting definitions of “art.”

In a video made for the BBC and screened in the exhibition, Bowery showcases a series of brash outfits of his own design while shopping and having tea at the stuffiest of London department stores, Harrods. His charm is overwhelming from the moment he steps in front of the camera, and I immediately understood how he captivated so many people during his life. He somehow reminded me of Princess Diana, and indeed, the comparison is not that crazy. Both were ’80s icons, both had personalities that were indescribably magnetic, and both dealt with painful life circumstances that were outside their control – for Diana, the royal family and the effects of its accompanying circus; for Bowery, the criminality of his sexual identity and his eventual death (in 1994) from an AIDS-related illness.

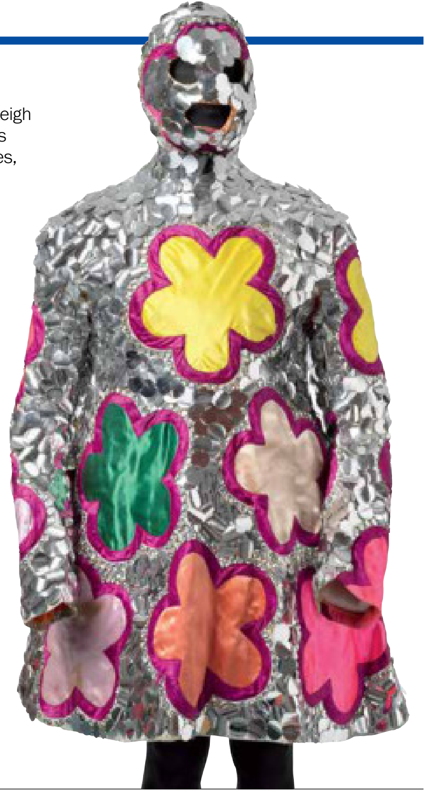
On the surface, Bowery’s club culture and the psychedelic frivolity of his so-called uselessness was about the pursuit of pleasure. But pain underlies this whole show. Darkness shadowed Bowery’s life, both on and behind the proverbial canvas, screen, and stage. In complex and conflicting ways, the exhibition shows how vigorously he danced with the devils that haunted him, from his early days in zit-inspired polka dots to his later ones giving bloody birth over and over, as if in the hope that he might deliver a new world. ●

– Eliza Goodpasture

Fergus Greer: *Leigh Bowery, Session 7, Look 37,* 1994.



One of Leigh Bowery’s costumes, 1988.



From left: ©Fergus Greer/Courtesy Michael Hoppen Gallery, London; ©Tate Photography/Courtesy Leigh Bowery Estate

NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

“Indigenous Identities: Here, Now & Always”

Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University
Through December 21, 2025

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith’s final curatorial project probes the coherence of “Indigenous identity.”

“Indigenous Identities: Here, Now & Always” refuses easy coherence. A survey of more than 100 works of contemporary Native American art by 97 artists from 56 Indigenous nations, the exhibition confronts viewers with a bold statement of heterogeneity. There is pottery, photography, film, and beadwork – jewelry, stone, steel, silver, and paint. Works range in scale and sensibility, from monumental portraits to abstract sculpture, yielding productive frictions and forming solidarities across artists and Indigenous cultures.

“Indigenous Identities” is Jaune Quick-to-See Smith’s final curatorial project; the groundbreaking artist, activist, and curator died only a few days before its opening this past February. The product of over a decade of correspondence between Smith and Zimmerli director Maura Reilly, “Indigenous Identities” continues Smith’s legacy of curatorial activism. The artist first developed the idea for what she considered a Whitney Biennial for Indigenous artists in the mid-1980s, a showcase that might highlight not only art world “stars,” to use her term, but rather the breadth of contemporary Indigenous artistic production – she advocated for recurring exhibitions ever after. The Zimmerli took up her mantle, insisting all aspects of the exhibition be Indigenous-led, from the curatorial team to the catalog design to the wall labels, which were written by the artists themselves. “We have to create our own space, bring our history forward, and communicate,” Neal Ambrose-Smith, Jaune’s son, an artist included in the show, said at the opening.

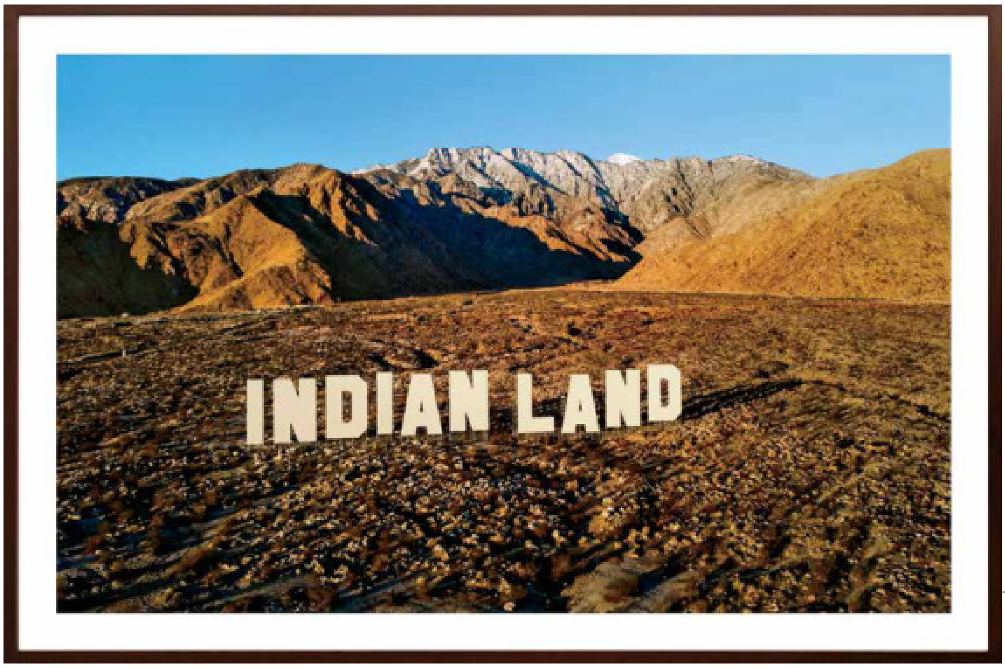
This final project unpacks the complexity of identity as a unifying concept for Indigenous contemporary artists. It’s a timely query: 2024 was a landmark year in the mainstream recognition of Native art. Jeffrey Gibson (Mississippi Band of Choctaw, Cherokee descent) represented the United States at a Venice Biennale whose pavilions highlighted contributions of Indigenous artists from across the globe, and the market for Indigenous art is booming.

Yet the newfound fervor for collecting so-called “Indigenous art” has masked a somewhat thornier question: namely, how – or to what degree – does the term “Indigenous” reflect the artists it purports to represent? Currently, there are 574 federally recognized Indigenous nations within the borders of the United States alone, each with their own distinct histories, politics, and visual traditions. That already large figure does not account for state-recognized Indigenous nations and others currently seeking recognition. When is “Indigenous” a reflection of solidarity across nations, and when does it flatten historical and political distinctions?

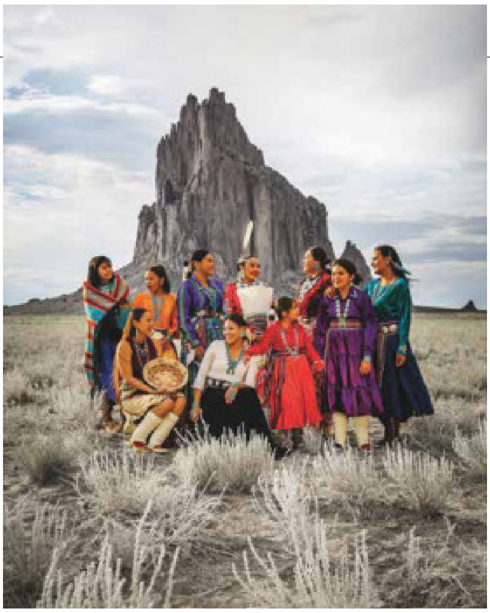
The exhibition opens with two photographs – one by Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit/Unangax̂) and another by Zoë Urness (Tlingit) – that together hint at differing interpretations of the show’s titular term. Galanin’s photograph documents his monumental sculpture *Never Forget* (2021), which spelled out INDIAN LAND in the desert outside Palm Springs. It resembled and responded to the Hollywood sign, erected in 1923 to promote the white-only residential community Hollywoodland. Urness turns to a different desert: that of the Navajo reservation. She photographed a group of Diné women and girls she met online in front of Tsé Bitʼaʼí (Shiprock), in New Mexico, inviting them to dress in regalia for a group portrait of laughter and conversation. Two photographs by two Tlingit artists, each taking a different approach to the exhibition’s theme: Galanin explores a pan-Indigenous identity, opting, as Isabella Robbins (Diné) has written, for “Indian Land” rather than “Cahuilla,” the people upon whose land the work appears. Urness, by contrast, centers specific people: Indigenous identity is, the photo suggests, a group of Navajo women enjoying everyday life in their home.

This contrast recalls long-standing debates over terms like “Indigenous,” with productive frictions explored throughout. Each of the exhibition’s four thematic sections – “Political,” “Tribal,” “Social,” and “Land” – tests the concept along a different axis. The first, “Political,” explores pan-Indigenous identity as a product of resistance to settler-colonial oppression. Gerald Clarke Jr.’s (Cahuilla) 2019 print of the word “native,” branded into paper alongside a silhouette of the United States, converses with Demian DinéYazhi’’s (Diné) 2020 letterpress appropriation of the star-spangled banner stating EVERY AMERICAN FLAG IS A WARNING SIGN. Referencing political activism through

Nicholas Galanin: *Never Forget*, 2021.



Forge Project Collection



Zoë Urness: *Year of the Women*, 2019.

printmaking, the works illustrate how a concept of Indigeneity was created through shared histories of survivance and activism.

The "Tribal" section focuses on how artists construct identity by connecting to ancestral stories and artistic practices. A 2014 beaded bandolier bag by Joe Baker (Delaware Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma) is one example of the contemporary revitalization of customary techniques: Studying the images and beadwork practices of historical Lenape (Delaware) bandolier bags in museum collections, Baker creates contemporary works inspired by his ancestors'. Beside it, Bryson Goodrunner Meyers's (Chippewa, Cree, Sicangu, Oglala, Hunkpapa, Dakota) *Bandolier Bag of 1916* (2022) adapts the florals used across Plains nations into a mixed-media work, illustrating the movement and exchange of motifs across Indigenous cultures. These and other functional works – including a 2007 trinket box by Jackie Larson Bread (Amskapi Pikuni) and a 2023 necklace of stone fingers by Carly Feddersen (Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation and mixed European heritage) – attest to the fallacy of any neat separation between "art" and "material culture" within many tribal nations.

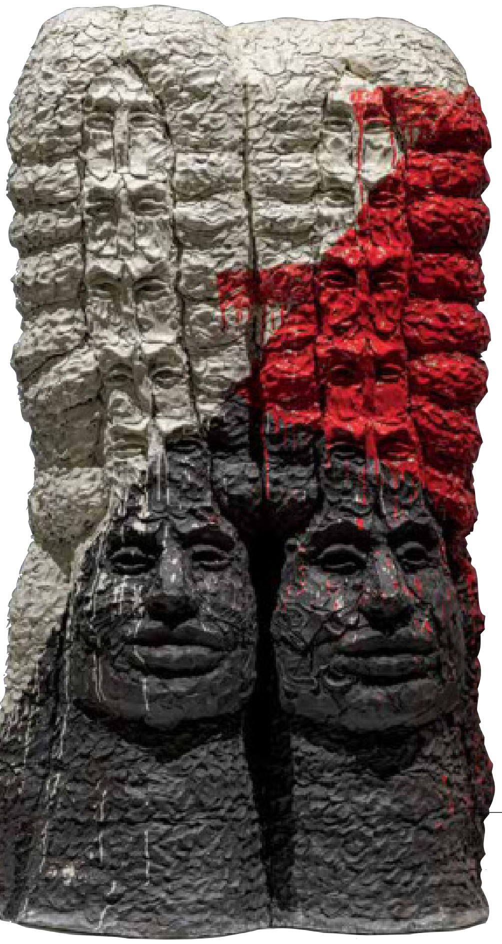
The "Social" section highlights how artists metabolize their lived experience. Several works center around the idea of the superhero: from Cara Romero's (Chemehuevi) Wonder-Woman-inspired portrait *Arla Lucia* (2019) to Star WallowingBull's (Ojibwe/Arapaho) colored-pencil drawing of an Arapaho superhero soaring through a frame of ancestral designs. A tiny acrylic painting of a burrito vendor by Ryan Singer (Diné) might be considered a superhero of sorts, as might George Longfish's (Seneca, Tuscarora) 1985 painting *Long Fish* flying over a technicolor stream.

In the show's final section, abstraction emerges as a formal strategy spanning time and place to address kinship relations between Indigenous peoples and land. Two works in particular, by father and son Dan and Michael Namingha (both Hopi/Tewa), trace a progression from a vibrant painterly depiction of a reservation sunset to a more kaleidoscopic, geometric manipulation of territory. Along with works like Athena LaTocha's (Hunkpapa Lakota, Ojibway) 2018–19 *Murderers Creek*, these works suggest that representing land is much more than depicting perspectival space. How to depict people's invisible *relationships* with land becomes a formal challenge.

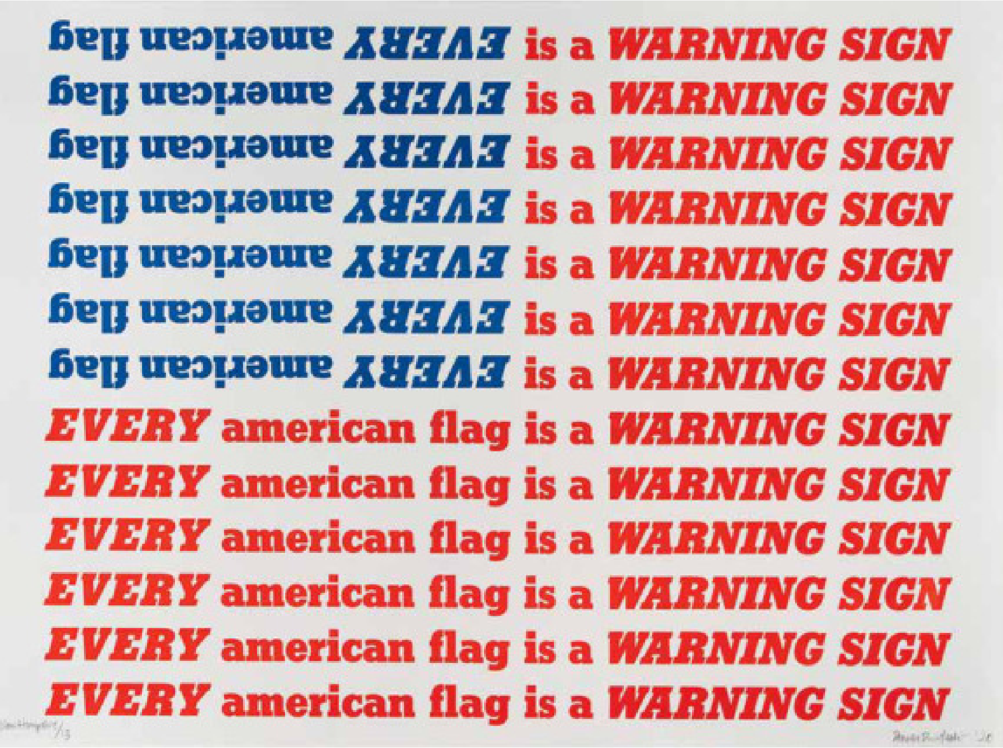
Many artists in the exhibition, as John Hitchcock (Comanche, Kiowa, and Northern European) remarked at the opening, are linked through lines of mentorship, artist residencies, and collaborative studios; Smith was intentional about placing internationally acclaimed artists in dialogue with lesser-known practitioners in hopes of raising the recognition of Indigenous artists overall. "It's like the pebble in the stream," she said in 2021. "The ripples go out and out." Smith spent 50 years building networks and relationships across Indigenous artists. Now that some of these artists have at last received recognition, what stands out most in "Indigenous Identities" are the connections that emerge *between* individuals. Identity, the show suggests, is not reducible to an individualistic pursuit, but inheres in conversations, collaborations, and intergenerational knowledge transfers. "After I'm gone, I can see that all the young people are going to be doing these incredible things," Smith once remarked. As she passes the torch to a new generation of Indigenous artists and curators, these "incredible things" will owe thanks to the groundwork Smith herself established. ●

– Julia Silverman

Raven Halfmoon: *E-a'-ti-ti*, 2021.



Demian DinéYazhi': *my ancestors will not let me forget this*, 2020.



EVERY american flag is a WARNING SIGN
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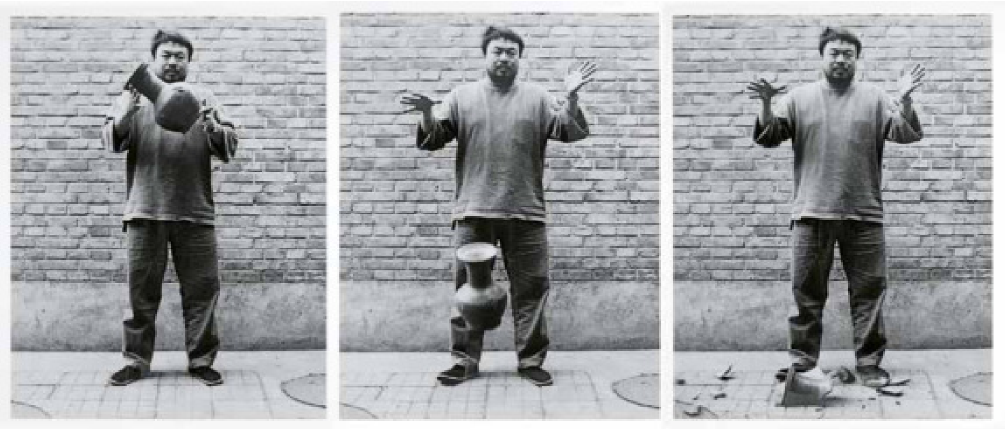
Clockwise from top: Courtesy Tia Collection; Courtesy Gochman Family Collection; Courtesy Forge Project Collection

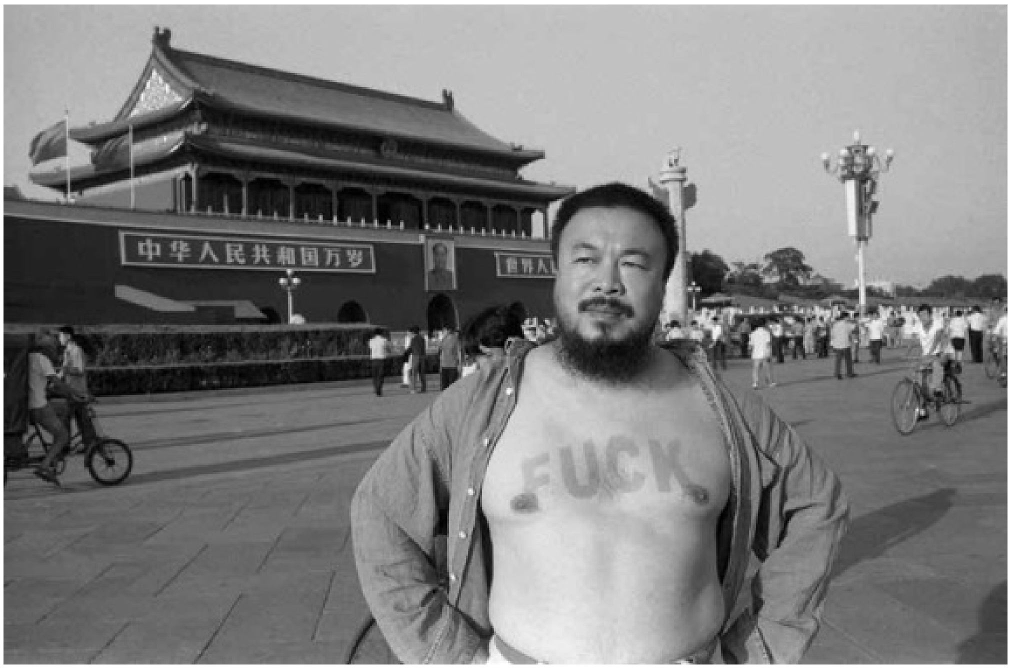
SEATTLE

Ai Weiwei

Seattle Art Museum
Through September 7

Ai paints a picture of life under authoritarianism that feels too close for comfort.


Ai Weiwei: *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995.

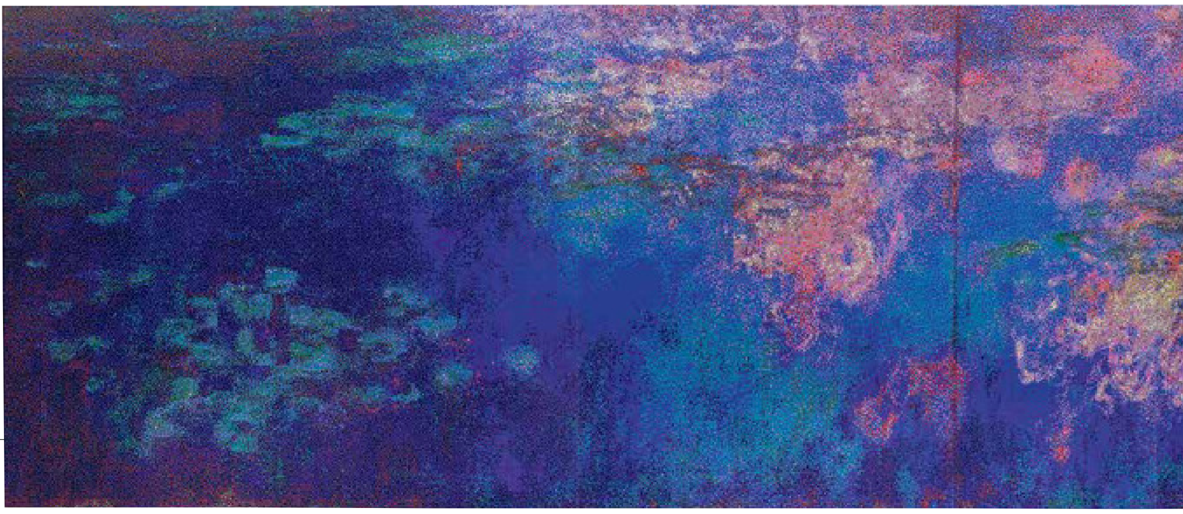

A photo from Ai's series *Beijing Photographs*, 1993–2003.

The word "fuck" in giant neon letters, (*FUCK*, 2020), greets visitors to the Seattle Art Museum's exhibition "Ai, Rebel: The Art and Activism of Ai Weiwei," the superstar artist's largest United States retrospective ever. The glowing expletive about sums up the prevailing liberal mood in the country these days – though perhaps not in the way the show's curator, Ping Foong, intended. Like the nearby sculpture of a human hand making the gesture, (*Middle Finger*, 2000), and the photographic series in which Ai gives the same to sites such as the Eiffel Tower and Tiananmen Square ("Study of Perspective," 1995–2011), *FUCK* is meant to convey defiance. Just as much, though, it conveys frustration, even impotence, in the face of abusive state power.

To be clear, Ai's oeuvre repeatedly demonstrates his refusal to be cowed by the political persecution the Chinese government has inflicted on him, most famously his brutal 2011 arrest and detention on tax evasion charges. And many parts of that oeuvre bristle with poignance and wit. But as the second Trump presidency takes a wrecking ball to domestic institutions and civil rights, as well as to the post–Cold War international order, one might wonder what the artist's strategies offer our current moment. Platitudes about raising consciousness and challenging authority will abound, but the most useful takeaways are subtler and stranger. "Ai, Rebel" holds a mirror up to recent liberal paradigms of political art, and unwittingly suggests their symbolism is in part compensatory, offering an aesthetic outlet for feelings of powerlessness.

Perhaps the strangest thing about Ai's work, seen all together in one place, is how familiar, even unoriginal, it appears. Part of that is by design: Ai remixes the classics. Duchamp's influence permeates everything, from a found mailbox (*U.S. Mail*, 2020), to a thicket of gnarled rebar salvaged from the 2008 Sichuan earthquake (*Forge*, 2008–12). Many other works allude indirectly to readymades, as in his iconic cross-cultural mash-up *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo* (2011). Still others play with duplication, such as his replicas of ancient Chinese porcelain vessels, or his Warholian iterations of painted Mao Zedong portraits. Even his recent Lego works translate classic Western paintings, by figures such as Rubens and Munch, into blocky candy-colored versions of the originals.

It's not just the contents of his works that appear familiar but also their forms, which span the repertoire of contemporary political art. There's Conceptualist documentation that bears witness to catastrophe, such as *Names of the Student Earthquake Victims Found by the Citizens'*

Water Lilies, 2022.


From top: Courtesy Ai Weiwei Studio (2); Courtesy neugerriemschneider Berlin

View of the exhibition “Ai, Rebel: The Art and Activism of Ai Weiwei,” 2025, at the Seattle Art Museum.

Investigation (2008–11), a sobering inkjet print catalog of the Sichuan earthquake’s 5,196 child victims. There’s performance documentation, as in the before, during, and after shots comprising his infamous triptych, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995). There are impressive aggregations of emotionally freighted objects, including a 50-foot-long snake sculpture from 2009 comprising interlocking children’s backpacks to memorialize the Sichuan victims. The list of aesthetic movies – public art installations, documentary films, activist social media campaigns – could go on, and will be familiar to art audiences, even if viewers less acquainted with the canon might find more shock value in them.

At this stage in Ai’s career, the question is not whether these qualities make his work original or derivative, or good or bad. His oeuvre contains plenty of powerful work – my favorites are the spiky assemblages of things like furniture or bicycles – that does not purport to be unique in terms of art history (or is unique perhaps in the sense that he takes old ideas to new extremes). The question is what it reveals about the popular understanding of political art, given that his work epitomizes so many of the genre’s tropes.

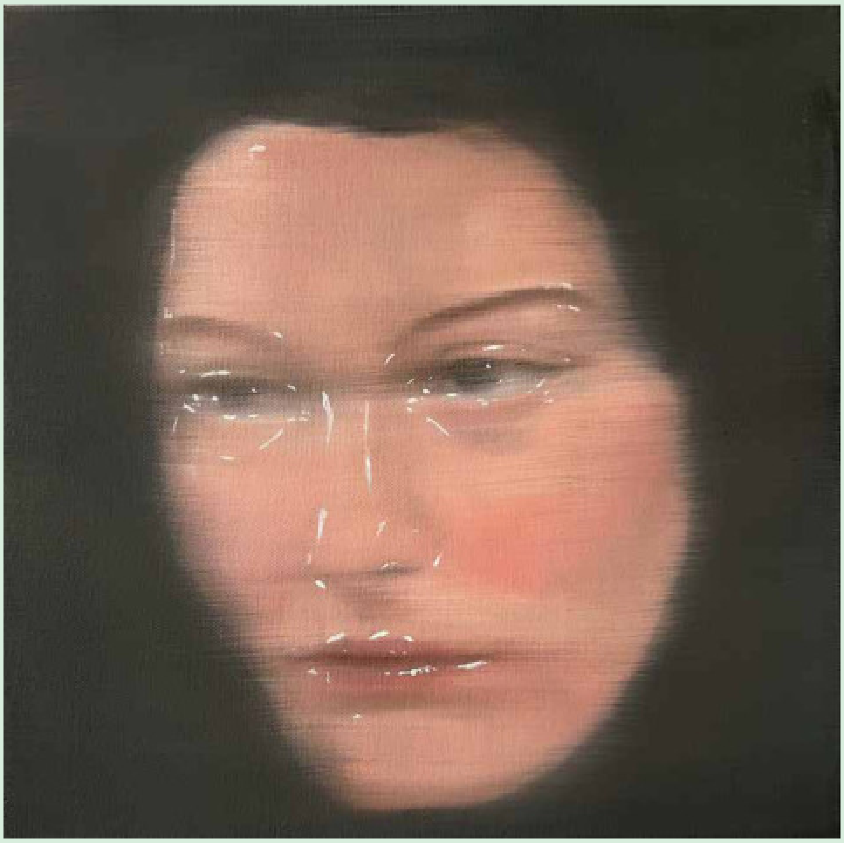
At the literal and figurative center of “Ai, Rebel” stands *81* (2013), a reproduction of the solitary confinement chamber where the artist was detained by the Chinese government, in an undisclosed location, for 81 days in 2011. The room’s bare lightless interior feels claustrophobic, a sense exacerbated by the padding that covers the furniture to prevent self-harm. The sculpture’s exterior, left unfinished because the artist never saw the room from the outside, has an amnesiac feel. The forbidding artwork differs in tone from the trickster Conceptualism that characterizes Ai’s other work. Its starkness renders palpable its harrowing stakes, eliciting despair rather than defiance, and suggesting there’s nothing uplifting about the artist’s tribulations. Standing inside the sculpture feels like being a rat plopped down in a maze, and grasping – *FUCK* – that you have limited control over your fate.

That sense of curtailed agency forms the retrospective’s heart of darkness, even if it’s not the message you’re meant to take away from the show. *81* is situated in an exhibition section titled “Watching Ai Watching Power,” its strained bit of wordplay tiptoes around the displayed works’ existential and political binds. Bearing witness to state malfeasance is a necessary task, well-suited to art’s capabilities. But, even at its most poignant, that task has practical limitations; at its most flat-footed, it verges on farce. Ai’s awkward 15-by-11-foot Lego reproduction from 2019 of the Mueller Report cover page, for instance, strains after purpose, as if its showy size and materials could compensate for its toothless political gesture.

The retrospective’s bold four-letter-word of an epigraph also evinces showmanship. But it has a deeper meaning: the title *FUCK* references Ai’s Beijing design studio, FAKE, which can sound like the English epithet when spoken in Mandarin. This thinly veiled pun is, sure, a form of defiance, but not the truth-to-power kind. Instead, it hints at the way some citizens must speak in code under authoritarianism, at the ersatz facades they adopt to maintain plausible deniability against censorship or worse. The pun challenges authority but also recognizes the dangerous power imbalance inherent to that challenge. As a punitive political atmosphere looms over US citizens, “Ai, Rebel” provides uncomfortable glimpses of how things might come to look and feel. ●

– Louis Bury

Photo Natali Wiseman/Courtesy Seattle Art Museum



Jen DeLuna: *Held Tightly*, 2024.

Holding On

Jen DeLuna, whose painting *Held Tightly* (2024) appears on the cover of this issue of *Art in America*, is profiled on page 54. From her studio in Boston, DeLuna told *A.i.A.* the backstory of the piece, shown here in full.

Most of my work is based on photographs found on eBay or in thrift or antique stores, or among old family photos. In a lot of my work, I'm thinking about how to recontextualize the subject within a painting, a lot of times through taking away most of the image: zooming in on a face, or surrounding a portrait with a wash of color or a wash of darkness.

This painting is based on a photograph of a woman looking away. I was thinking about memory – the wistfulness and the fleeting feeling of memory. That's why it's painted to be both in motion and in tension with the stillness of the highlights. I was thinking about this woman emerging or disappearing into the background, becoming one with the darkness, or fading into it. It's playing with the ephemeral qualities of the photographs I work with. It's a very specific person, but, at the same time, I know nothing about the person, so there's ambiguity that sits with it.

I was living in Pittsburgh when I found this photograph at a great place, the Center for Creative Reuse, that's like a Goodwill or a thrift store but specifically for art and craft supplies. You can buy individual photographs, but you can also buy them by the pound. When I was in school I would spend hours looking through the photographs, trying to find one that had a particular feeling. It's hard to speak about what specifically draws me to a photo, but I know it when I see it. Sometimes there's a note on the back – I'm a pretty sentimental person, even for memories that aren't my own. I enjoy those moments when there's something specific and special about a photo.

The title, *Held Tightly*, draws on the feeling of holding on to a memory, or trying to. I've always thought that one of the best feelings is when you remember something for the first time and it feels so crisp and new. You feel as though you're living in it. The more time you spend thinking about it, the more it lessens and blurs. You start to remember the last time you remembered it.

With a lot of my figurative work, a feeling I'm drawn to is one that's still and serene but slightly off. I like the stillness and the calmness of my figurative works, and how that works in relation to my dog paintings [*Editor's note*: they are often close-ups of snarling mouths, as detailed on page 54] and the aggressiveness and violence in those.

The woman in this one is looking so specifically at something outside the frame. At the same time, it's almost like a mask put onto the darkness. You don't know what's happening: All you have is her face, not in relation to anything. There are no clues giving you any idea about who she is, where she is, or what she's thinking about. ●

Courtesy Jen DeLuna (2)

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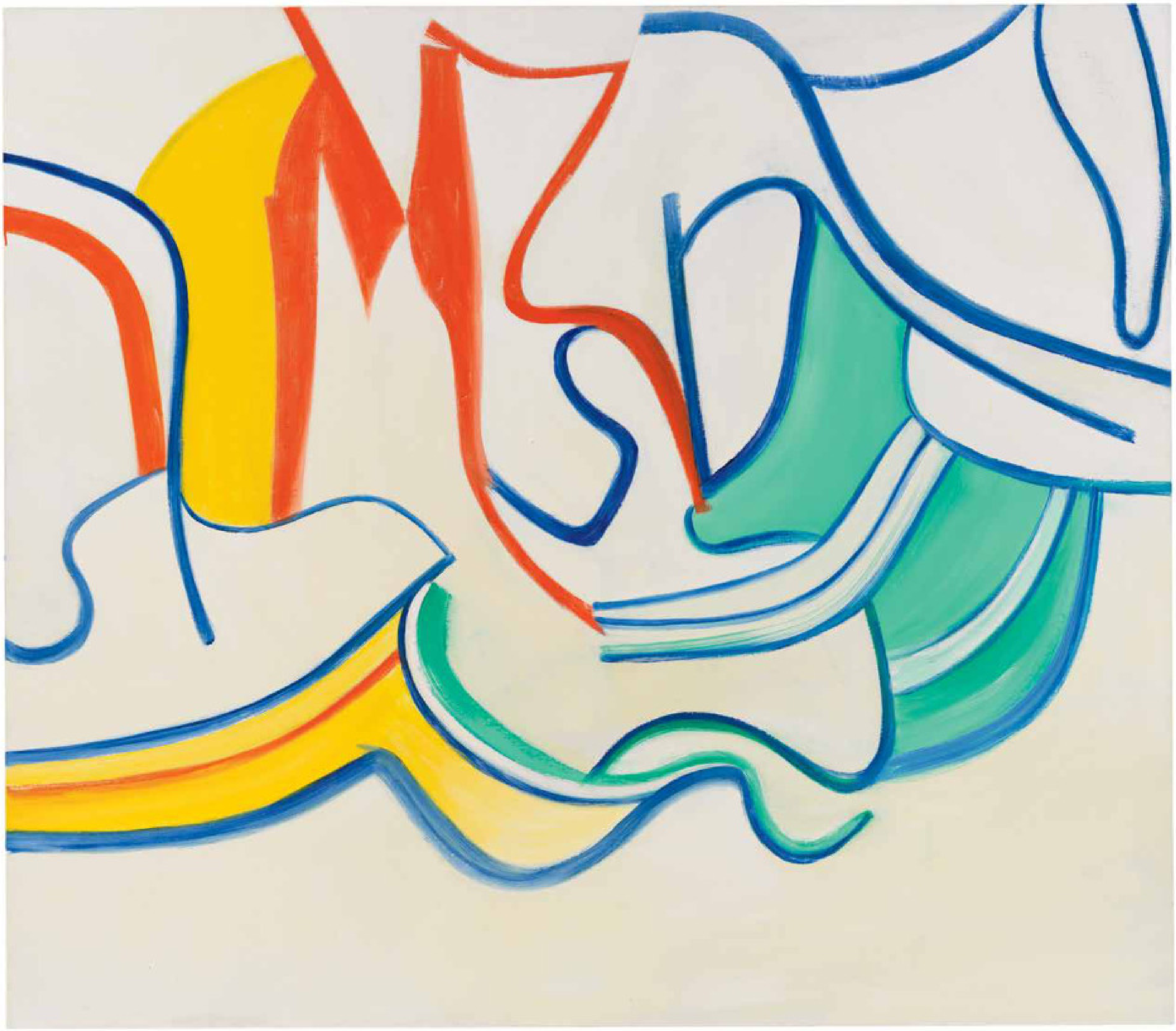

Untitled X, 1985 © 2025 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/ARS, NY

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